MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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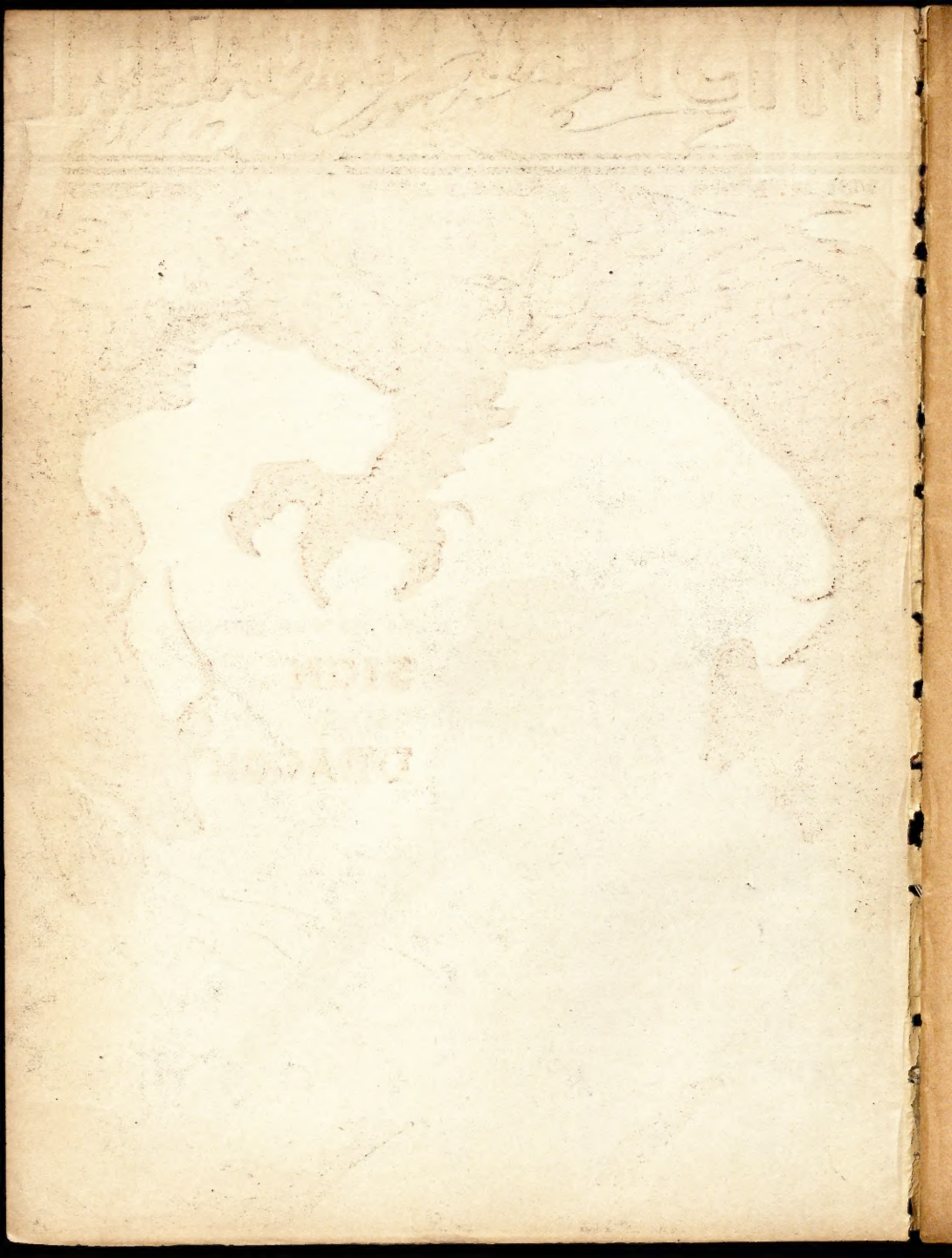
A DETECTIVE STORY

SIGN OF THE DRAGON

BY C. MARTIN-EDDY, JR.



COMING! "THE MAGIC OF DETECTIVE WOO FANG" IN OUR NEXT ISSUE.

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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SIGN OF THE DRAGON

THE STORY OF A FEMALE DETECTIVE

By C. MARTIN EDDY, JR.

CHAPTER ONE

AN OATH OF ALLEGIANCE

WHEN my father was stricken, one morning in April, Death was the farthest from my thoughts. I looked upon it, as did Mrs. Waynemore, the housekeeper, as a passing illness. But, as he grew steadily worse, Doctor Barnes, who had known me since he helped usher me into this old world, to me to hope for the best but to be prepared for the worst. At last came the day when the doctor told the old gentleman that his hours were numbered, that he had done all in his power to stay the onward march of the Grim Reaper. Father listened to the verdict of the physician, and asked that I be summoned. My heart was heavy as I went in and took my place at his bedside.

He was quite calm, but I could detect a suppressed excitement in his eyes as he asked the doctor and the housekeeper to retire. In spite of its sadness my heart beat a little faster as they left the room, and I began to wonder what it could be that he wanted of me—alone. As soon as he was sure that the others were safely out of hearing, he indicated a seat for me by the head of the bed. "Chester," he began, "before I leave this old world I want to tell you a tale out of my life that I have never told you before. I want you to listen without interruption, for my time is short and I want to be sure that it is finished before I pass on."

He paused for a moment, as if doubtful just how to begin.

"I was just a bit older than you are now, and I had seen pretty much of the world, even at that age. But no

matter where I roamed, I always came back to Manorport sooner or later. It was the only real home I knew. I had been back from my last trip just a few days. My pockets were well lined, for my last venture had been a profitable one. We all have our hobbies and mine has always been the acquisition of curios in the way of jewelry or trinkets, worthless except for their oddity. I was somehow reminded of a peculiar ring I had marked in a little Chinese shop, on the waterfront in Boston, which I had passed on my way home a few days before. I was possessed of an uncontrollable desire to add it to my collection. The desire for that ring grew upon me all through the day, and I spent a sleepless night because of it. The next morning I left Manorport intent only upon acquiring it. The shop I mentioned was in rather an unsavory section of the city, but I knew my Boston well. Many was the oddity I had picked up in this selfsame shop. The Chinaman who ran the place—Len Sang he called himself—knew me for a regular customer. My luck must have been sidetracked somehow. When I reached the shop I found, to my dismay, that the ring was gone from the window. There was no need of 'pidgin' English with Len Sang. I don't know where he learned, but he could speak our language as well as I.

"'Yes,' he told me, 'I remember well the ring you have in mind. Was it not a silver ring, with a peculiar setting? A Chinese dragon, with eyes of jade?'

"'That's the one I came all the way back here to get,' I told him. 'Where is it? I want to buy it.'

"'It is gone, sir. I sold it only last evening.'

"'Sold it! But I must have it!' The desire for that ring was becoming an obsession.

"'But yes,' he returned; 'wait but a moment.'

"He disappeared into the back room of the shop. When he returned he had in his hand what I could have sworn was the self-same ring I had seen in the shop window.

"'Sly dog! I thought you told me you had sold it,' I accused him.

"'Aye, sir, and so I did,' he bowed. 'This is its mate. There were only two of these rings ever made. The one I sold last evening to the customer I mentioned. This ring is its exact duplicate.'

"That rather savored of mystery, and I asked him if by chance the rings had a history.

"'All that I know,' he responded, 'is that a few weeks ago a little old man came into the store with these two rings to sell me. He told me they had been made especially for two Chinese noblemen, whose names and peculiarities I well knew, and were worn by them until their recent death. He claimed that they were the only rings of their kind ever made. How he came into possession of them, or his right to sell them, I did not question. We seldom question such rights here. I was taken by the peculiar character of the rings, so I bought them, almost at my own price. One I put in the window, where it has remained until last night; the other is here.'

"He passed it over the counter for my inspection.

"I was rather skeptical about the story he told of the rings and how they came into his possession. It came too readily to his lips to carry much of any weight with me. From what I knew of Len Sang, he was, like most of the others of his race, secretive and taciturn. To find him loquacious was to make me suspicious that he must have a reason for being so.

"I did not give him any inkling of my doubts, however, but began haggling with him over the price of the remaining ring. Len Sang was a shrewd business man, and he knew I wanted the ring badly. Finally we came to terms. I forget just what the ring cost me, but Len Sang was no loser, of that I am certain.

"Len Sang bowed me all the way to the door of the shop, a sleepy, oily, shop-worn smile on his saffron face, thanking me profusely all the while for my custom. I was sorry, of course, that I had not been able to acquire the pair of rings, but I rather congratulated myself on my luck in there being a second one that I might buy. My bargaining had made me rather thirsty, so I made for a nearby grog-shop to quench my thirst and provide myself with an opportunity to examine my purchase more closely.

"I had scarce settled myself with my half-and-half when I spied some one whom I had not seen in an age. It was 'Spike' Burgess; a big hulking brute of a man, but as good-hearted a chap as it had ever been my good fortune to meet. Many a wild time we had weathered together and escaped unscathed. He was the only real 'pal' I had ever had, and I'd been lonesome enough, drifting around alone since I saw him last, two years before. I hailed him, and he came lumbering over to my table.

"'Peter Brent, by all that's holy! Where have you been keeping yourself? Damn it all, old man, I'm glad to see you!'

"His mighty fist came down upon the table in emphasis of his remark with a crash that nearly splintered the boards of the table itself. I gripped the brawny hand he extended, and we settled down to talk over the things that had happened since we had last seen one another.

"We exchanged confidences freely, for at that hour of the day the saloon was well-nigh deserted. At length I bethought myself of my latest purchase. I slipped it off my finger and held it up for Spike's inspection.

"I was totally unprepared for the effect it had upon him. At the sight of it his eyes dilated, his hands gripped the edges of the tables so tightly that the muscles on his arms stood out like whipcords, and the perspiration ran down his face in streams.

"'Good God, man!' he rasped, his voice hoarse and unnatural, 'where did you get that ring?'

"'Why the excitement, Spike?' I questioned. 'I bought that ring at Len Sang's, not more than a couple hours ago.'

"The terror slowly faded from his eyes.

"'It's all right, Peter, as long as you bought it,' he returned; 'but the last time I saw that ring, or its mate, was in Hongkong. It was there I heard the legend that goes with it. If you'll satisfy me by putting that ring back in your pocket before some one else sees it, we'll take a little walk and I'll tell you in a few words why I was so upset at the sight of it.'

"Back went the ring into my pocket, and we strolled aimlessly along the waterfront while he told me the tale he had heard about the dragon rings.

"'The rings are nearly as old as the legend itself, Peter,' he went on. 'No one knows who made them, or for whom they were made. But they are supposed to possess this peculiar property: To any one into whose possession they come legitimately, that person will have good luck and protection against all evil. But, should one of them be stolen, the charm is broken. Instead, sudden death is in store for the culprit, and grave danger for the owner of the other until the stolen ring has been recovered, or until the thief disposes of it in some way. The last time I saw one of those rings, it was on the finger of a dead Chinese shop-keeper, in Hongkong. No one knew how he had come to his death, but it was rumored that the ring had come into his possession by questionable means.'

"'But why the concern, Spike, at my simply having one of the rings in my possession? You didn't think I had stolen it, did you?'

"'No, but some one else might. The news is all over

the waterfront that Len Sang's was entered last night, and the mate to that ring stolen from the show-window. It's a wonder you hadn't heard. I'd advise you to keep it out of sight until you get safely away from here.'

"Then I knew the reason for Len Sang's talkative mood of the morning. He knew the legend of the rings, without a doubt; but he was afraid, should I learn it, he would be unable to dispose of the remaining ring, with its attendant danger for the owner.

"'I've been up home in Manorport the last few days, so I haven't heard any of the news down around here,' I explained. 'I saw the ring in the show-window when I passed the shop on the way home. I came down to Boston to-day on purpose to buy it.' Then I told him of Len Sang's story of how he acquired the rings, and the sale of the other the night before.

"'Smooth-tongued yellow devil!' Spike commented. Then, as if dismissing the subject, 'Where are you headed, matey?'"

"'I'm going back up to Manorport and rest up for a little while. After that, the Lord only knows. Say, Spike,' with a sudden inspiration, 'come along up home and spend the night with me. I'm all alone, you know.'

"He thought it over for a while, and not being able to think up any excuse that I would stand for, accepted the invitation.

"Trains weren't as frequent in those days as they are now, Chester, and it was well along towards ten o'clock before we reached Manorport.

"As we made our way along the deserted main street, Spike caught my arm and drew me into the shadow of one of the buildings.

"'I've a feeling were being followed,' he told me.

"I laughed at him. 'What's the matter with you, anyhow, to-day, Spike?. You're as nervous as an old woman. Just a while ago I thought your eyes would pop out of your head at the mere sight of a ring, and now——'

"He swung me out of harm's way just in time. I could feel the swish as the keen blade of a knife fanned my cheek, slashing through the air at the exact spot I had been but a moment before.

"In a flash, Spike was on my assailant. Silently they locked together in a struggle for the possession of that keen, gleaming, ugly blade.

"Back and forth they struggled, neither uttering a sound. I was helpless to take any active part in the fray, lest I dislodge Spike's grip upon the man's wrist. If that happened, one of us was as good as dead.

"At last Spike's tremendous weight began to tell. Inch by inch he forced my assailant back over his knee, till they were bent double. Suddenly the knife flashed free, as Spike aimed it at the body of the man who had attacked us. He sank to the pavement without a sound.

"We rolled the man over to see who was responsible for our adventure, and looked down into the yellow face of the Chinaman who used to work around Len Sang's.

"And there, on the finger of the hand that had sought to take my life, gleamed the mate to the ring that reposed in my pocket. The legend of the ring had once more worked itself out completely.

"I took from his finger the ring which had been the cause of the trouble. We reached my home at last and, safe in the rooms I occupied, we examined the rings closely. They were just as much alike as two peas in a pod. Far into the night we sat up talking over old times, but always our conversation would revert to the subject of the rings on the table before us. They seemed to hold a strange fascination, somehow. The jade eyes gleamed up at us with a hint of mystery, and power, that enthralled us. At last I was imbued with a big idea.

"'Spike,' I announced, 'you have saved my life to-night. Many's the close shave you and I have had together; many's the time when our necks have been in danger; but to-night, had it not been for you, it would be I who lies dead out there upon the street instead of that Chinaman. I owe you a debt of gratitude. Take one of these rings. If ever you—or should you settle down some day, any of your family after you—need any assistance of any kind, even at the risk of life itself, the sign of the dragon, the symbol of this ring, will bring that assistance from me or mine.'

"He protested at first, but finally, over the table, in the early morning hours, we took a solemn oath of allegiance before God, to be handed down, if necessary, to the next generation, that Brent or Burgess, whichever the case might be, would respond to the 'Sign of the Dragon' and render assistance to the limit of his ability and power.

"The next morning he left me, and from that day to this I have never seen him. I heard, a few years later, that he had married and settled down, just as I had done, but in all these years I have had no word from him. That night, over the table, with the dragon eyes of the ring gleaming oddly in the lamp-light, is just as vivid in my memory as if it had happened yesterday. I want your promise, Chester, that, should occasion ever arise, you will keep the oath I swore that night, and lend all the assistance in your power, even at the risk of your life."

As he finished his story, father reached beneath his pillow and passed me the most peculiar ring I had ever seen. It was a heavy silver band, with a wonderfully wrought dragon embossed upon it, and worked in green gold. Its eyes were of jade.

"This is the ring, Chester. Somewhere is the mate to it, an exact duplicate, the only other one like it in existence. You have heard my story. Can I depend upon you to take up the promise and live it out to the letter? It is my last wish, Chester."

I felt enthralled with the weirdness of it all. It was the adventure I had longed for, prayed for, all of my life. How could I do otherwise than assent to his wishes?

"Dad," I told him, "as God is my judge, I swear to respond to the sign of this dragon ring if it should ever call to me."

"Chester," he returned, "the word of a Brent is good as gold. I can die happy in the knowledge that my trust will be safely carried out. I knew I could depend upon you, boy of mine."

I kissed his hot brow and slipped the mysterious ring into my pocket as the old doctor clamored for admittance once more. That night my father passed out into the Great Beyond. He had gone forth upon his last Adventure.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SIGN OF THE DRAGON

THREE uneventful years had rolled by since the death of my father. Not so very long before he died, on my twenty-first birthday, to be specific, he had taken me into the business with him as junior partner, and the firm had changed from the widely-known "Peter Brent" to "Brent & Son." Therefore, upon his demise, the supervision of the business came into my hands.

In order to be nearer my work I had disposed of the old place in Manorport, and taken apartments in Boston. Here I lived the life of a recluse. The ordinary social life of the city bored me tremendously. I still yearned for some outstanding adventure that I might look back

upon in after years, and point to as having lifted me out of the rut of humdrum, everyday life. I had about come to the conclusion that adventure, as I interpreted the word, was dead. At any rate, I felt convinced it was not to be found outside the covers of some lurid fiction magazine. Adventure, however, is somewhat like a German submarine. She lurks in some unexpected quarter, waiting a chance to torpedo her victims without warning, and leaves them to sink or swim as best they may.

I had almost forgotten the dragon ring, which rested snugly at home in a corner of my desk drawer. The tale which had seemed so vivid at my father's telling, was losing its grip on me as they passed by. In fact, had it not been for an occasional "cleaning up" process, when I would always come across the odd ring he had given me, I think I would have forgotten the episode entirely.

At such times I would think over the whole story as he had told it to me. I often wondered if the sign of the dragon would ever call upon me to keep the pledge my father made those long years before, and that I had sworn to observe.

I would always dismiss the matter with a laugh, and tuck the ring away once more, to be forgotten until the next time I "cleaned house." Of course, nothing would ever come of it! I was a fool to fritter away my time dreaming over such idle fancies. I was living in an age of science and system. Adventure was dead!

My longing for some sort of unusual happening made me weave romances around every odd character I passed upon the street. I builded air-castles of adventure from the most trivial incidents. Somewhere I had read that each life was only one of a million "passing tales," that hidden in each life was some unsuspected incident that might furnish the material for a yarn such as few could spin. I wasted many idle moments in a futile endeavor to fathom the "skeleton in the closet" of my acquaintances and business associates.

Perhaps it was this trick of poking my nose into other people's business that accounted for the bad case of "nerves" I was developing. At twenty-five one ought not to shy at a shadow, as I confess I had been doing of late, especially when he was always prattling of an innate desire for adventure.

For the past few days I had had the uncomfortable sensation of being followed. I could "feel" the intentness of a pair of eyes watching the back of my head. Wherever I went I had an uncontrollable desire to suddenly turn and confront whoever was on my trail.

Of course it was all absurd. Nothing more or less than a hallucination, due to my foolish imaginings.

Still, the feeling persisted with such bulldog tenacity I could not rid myself of it.

If any one was shadowing me I'll give him credit for making a good job of it. Try as I might, I could not catch my shadow unawares. I tried every device I had ever read about for forcing one into revealing himself, but all to no avail.

The persistency of the notion gave me an uneasy feeling I can hardly describe. After a few days of it I decided to take a long-postponed vacation. Then something occurred which startled me into a belief that perhaps adventure was still on the job, after all.

The morning mail arrived at my apartment each day just before breakfast, and part of my morning program, religiously adhered to, was the opening of the mail over the coffee cups.

There was always something, a bill from the tailor, an invitation to some function or other which would require a polite note of refusal; in fact, the tenor of my morning mail was quite often responsible for the frame of mind in which I reached the office.

This particular morning brought several letters. I glanced at them automatically before opening any of them, and my attention was arrested by one addressed in a distinctly feminine, yet unfamiliar, hand.

I instinctively separated it from the others, and left it to be opened last.

There was the usual monthly statement from my club, and an advertisement or two that were quickly disposed of. With my usual habit of making a mountain out of a molehill, I began building a mystery right away around the unopened letter. Why should a young lady be writing to me? My acquaintances included few of the fair sex, and none who would have any reason for writing to me. (Of course, I imagined my unknown correspondent as young and, perhaps, a wee bit good-looking.)

I turned the missive over and over in my hands, even holding it up to the light in a vain effort to get some inkling of the contents before I opened it. It was mine, all right; there could be no mistake about that. The address was clear enough:

CHESTER BRENT, Esq.
Cheltingham Apartments, Boston, Mass.

I suppose if I had been anything but a hare-brained young fool, I would have had that letter opened and read two or three times, but, as I have said before, I was a worshipper at the shrine of any possible adventure. At last I slit the flap of the envelope, and drew out its contents expectantly. But with all my suppositions, I was totally unprepared for what that envelope actually contained. The note itself was unsigned, and was in the same firm, legible hand as the writing on the envelope. It was short and businesslike in the extreme:

My Dear Mr. Brent:

I am very desirous of seeing you on a matter of importance. I take this method of announcing that I shall call at your office some time Tuesday, the twelfth, to interview you. As it is imperative that I see you in person, I shall identify myself by means of a card such as I have enclosed.

The note was puzzling enough, I'll admit, but it was not the note with which I was chiefly concerned. It was the enclosure. An ordinary-sized calling-card, perfectly blank except for a large blotch of red sealing wax in the center. And imprinted in the wax was an ensignia that could only have been made by the mate to the green dragon ring with the jade eyes, that reposed in my desk-drawer!

The sign of the dragon!

The words of my father came back to me as vividly as if he was at that moment speaking them again into my ear:

" . . . that Brent or Burgess, whichever the case might be, would respond to the sign of the dragon and render assistance to the limit of his ability and power."

And I was pledged to carry out this promise to the letter. I rescued my ring from its resting-place and fitted it to the dragon seal upon the card. Any doubts that I might have had as to its authenticity were immediately dispelled. It fitted as well as if my own ring had been the one to make the impression. My brain was whirling in an attempt to grasp the significance of it all. After all these years the twin rings were again fated to cross each other's paths. What would be the outcome? I slipped the ring on my finger and gazed at it, fascinated by the gleaming jade eyes of the green and gold dragon. I

rather hesitated to wear the ring, for I knew its oddity would invite innumerable questions, but I was resolved that it should accompany me wherever I went until this adventure was at an end. Tuesday the twelfth? That was to-morrow! I was keyed up to the highest pitch of excitement. Adventure was not dead! Without warning I had been plunged into what seemed to me must prove the experience I had wished for so long. A year-old pledge of fealty; twin rings of an oddity that defied adequate description as symbols of that pledge; an unsigned note in a feminine hand—what more could one ask in the way of a mysterious setting? I could have imagined nothing more promising of future thrills than this combination.

I don't exactly know how I got through the day, but I know that evening came at last. My mind was still intent upon the caller of the morrow. What would she be like? Would she be dark or fair, young or old? I pictured myself as the hero of all kinds of impossible adventures, with my mysterious correspondent as the much-persecuted heroine. I slept but little that night, I can tell you, and my trip to the office was made with my mind way off somewhere above the clouds. Not another word had I heard. All that I knew was that the sign of the dragon had called to me to aid, and that the call had come in the handwriting of a woman.

CHAPTER THREE

ANITA BURGESS

MY expected visitor kept me on the anxious seat until well into the afternoon. For fear that I might miss her, I pointed to a nearby restaurant and had them send my luncheon to the office. I was beginning to be assailed by doubts and misgivings, when the boy brought me an envelope addressed in the same handwriting as my note of the previous day. I knew before I opened it exactly what I would find inside. An exact duplicate of the card I already carried in my pocket. Just a blotch of red sealing wax, stamped with the sign of the dragon.

"Lady to see you, sir," he announced. "She wouldn't give her name, but she told me to bring you the note, and said you would understand."

"It's all right," I assented; "show her in."

The dragon ring in my pocket seemed to find its way to my finger automatically. At last my mysterious caller had arrived. At last I was to learn what service I could render to the owner of the other ring. I suppose I should have been calm and self-possessed, but my heart was beating at trip-hammer speed. I felt myself growing hot and cold by turns. As I rose to greet my visitor, however, I congratulated myself that outwardly I was as cool as a cucumber. My first impression of her was eminently satisfactory. From the top of her modish hat, set jauntily upon a wealth of auburn hair, to the tip of her natty gray kid boots, she was typical of the modern, self-reliant American woman. She was just the type that to my mind fitted her present rôle to perfection.

"Mr. Brent?" she inquired, extending her hand. I noticed at once, on the middle finger, a replica of the ring I was wearing.

I nodded in acquiescence, and drew up a chair for her.

"You received my note?"

In reply, I produced the two strange calling cards I had received.

"You have the advantage of me, Miss——"

"Burgess," she supplied. "Anita Burgess. I trust you will pardon the rather mysterious way in which I announced myself, but my business is of such a nature that I preferred my identity to remain unknown until I was sure that I had found the right Mr. Brent."

"And you are certain?"

"Oh, yes. The ring on your left hand satisfies me on that score. But, to the business on hand. You are familiar with the pledge associated with the ring you wear?"

"I promised my father, on his death-bed, three years ago, to observe the pledge he made to your namesake, should the occasion ever arise."

"Good enough! I do not come to you through choice, Mr. Brent, but dire necessity. I have a favor to ask of you that may entail the risking of your life. I want you to listen closely to what I have to tell, and think carefully before you decide as to whether you wish to take so great a risk as I must ask of you."

I nodded.

"First of all, Mr. Brent, I want your promise that when I leave this building you will make no attempt to follow me, or to learn anything more of this affair than I choose to tell you."

"In other words, you are asking me to go into this affair with my eyes shut?"

"It is for your own protection as well as mine, Mr. Brent. From the time your connection with this matter is established, both your safety and mine are doubly menaced. I have exercised the utmost caution to keep my visit here this afternoon from reaching the ears of my —suppose I call them adversaries?—and any act of yours that might tend to arouse their suspicions would set all my scheming at naught. Therefore, before I proceed, I would like your promise to make no move that might embarrass me or make my position more difficult."

"Very well, I shall abide by your wishes in the matter. Just what can I do to assist you?"

"I have in my possession certain documents that were left in my care by my father, who gave me the ring and told me its story at the same time. The nature of these documents I am not at present at liberty to divulge.

"There is a certain crowd that is very desirous of acquiring possession of these documents. The importance in which this other faction holds the acquisition of these papers will be emphasized when I tell you that two attempts have been made upon my life in the past few weeks. It was after the second attempt that I bethought myself of the pledge connected with the odd ring that I had. I knew it could do no harm to look up the owner and see if he, too, held the pledge as sacred. If not, I would be no worse off than before; if he did, I would try to enlist his aid. My first step was to locate the Brents, whom my father had last heard of as still living in Manorport. I went there, and found that the Brent homestead had been sold, but that a Chester Brent, the son of the man my father knew, had moved to Boston, where he was carrying on his father's business. As I said before, all this information had to be gathered with the utmost caution, lest my opponents suspect I planned to enlist the aid of any one; and this made it doubly hard to procure. Luckily I had but little difficulty in locating you, and here I am. Now, my plan is simply this: The very nature of these documents I speak of make them valueless unless one has the entire set of them."

Miss Burgess drew a sealed envelope from somewhere about her person, and laid it on the desk in front of me.

"In this envelope, sealed, are just half of the papers I mentioned. I have the other half in a duplicate package in my possession. Will you take charge of this package for me, with the solemn promise to guard it with your life, if necessary, until I send or come for it? Of course,

you understand that I trust you to make no attempt to learn the contents. I may find it impossible to call for the package in person. Do not let it leave your possession on any pretext unless the one who demands it is wearing the ring I now wear."

"But suppose I am in doubt as to what move to make? I will not know where to locate you, or——"

"You have a phone at your apartments. I will communicate with you from time to time, when I can safely do so. You have my story, Mr. Brent. Think carefully before you make any decision. Remember that two attempts have already been made upon my life, and that, should your connection with this affair be established, your life, too, would be constantly in danger. It is no mere child's play, this undertaking, or I would not be tempted to enlist outside aid."

I picked up the sealed packet, and turned it idly in my hands. Prompted by some peculiar impulse, probably my inborn longing for adventure, I tucked it snugly away in my inside pocket.

"That is my answer, Miss Burgess. The package is now in my care. Rest assured that it will be ready for you when you desire."

"I fear, Mr. Brent," she went on, "that you underestimate the power of the forces that oppose us."

"I must remind you," I told her, "that you have asked me to help you because of the pledge made between my father and yours. Can I emphasize my seriousness more than by promising that, by the sign of the dragon ring, I shall protect these documents no matter to what risks or dangers I may be exposed?"

"My best wishes to you, Sir Knight of the Dragon," she smiled, rising. "Then I have your promise to make no effort to trace me or to ascertain the contents of that packet until I give you permission?"

"You have my promise," I solemnly returned.

With a last smile, the door closed behind her, and she was gone.

Alone once more, the whole conversation seemed more of a dream than anything else. It couldn't be possible, I told myself, that any such thing could happen here, in Boston, in the twentieth century. Impossible! And yet, the two unique calling cards were still on the desk before me, and I could feel the pressure of the package in my inside pocket to help convince me that it was not by any means a mere figment of my vivid imagination.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EPISODE OF THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

YIELDING to impulse may some day get me into serious trouble.

When I promised Miss Burgess that I would make no attempt to locate her or learn any more about her than I already knew, I made it in all good faith. I would have undoubtedly kept it inviolate had it not been for a trifling incident that occurred a few evenings later.

I had not been to the theater for several weeks, and was determined to see a much-advertised play that was, according to its press agent, "the talk of the town."

I was rather disappointed in the performance. Not but what it was good enough in its way, but it didn't come up to my expectations, as is quite often the case with these over-advertised productions.

It was during the intermission between the second and last act that I spied her, directly ahead of me, just a few rows away.

There was no mistaking her for any one else. Anita Burgess was of a distinctive type that one could pick out from among a thousand.

I thrilled at the thought that here was a girl whose life was constantly in danger and who was bold enough to attend a well-filled play-house, and alone! Perhaps, I decided, she was safer here than in her own home. One would scarcely attempt an assault where there were so many onlookers. Yes, her reasoning was correct; she was in no danger during the performance, at any rate.

But how about afterwards? I began to fancy all sorts of dangers besetting her. I wavered between my promise to keep away from her until I was sent for, and an asinine desire to play knight-errant, uninvited, and follow along at her heels to protect her.

The last act of the play was beginning, and I temporarily forgot the subject of Anita Burgess in my endeavors to find some redeeming feature in the play being enacted on the stage.

As soon as the play was ended and the lights flashed on, my mind reverted to the mystery girl and her problems again.

She had already risen, and was making her way along the crowded aisle, toward the foyer.

The idea of playing watch-dog to my lady of the ring must have gained a greater control over my mind than I imagined. For the moment my actions seemed to be regulated by some outside agency. I followed her down the aisle, keeping well in the rear, but always near enough so that I did not lose sight of her.

As she reached the foyer my attention was attracted to a man who detached himself from a small group of friends, broke off his conversation with an attractive, olive-skinned young lady, and fell into step behind my quarry.

There was nothing unusual for an incident of this kind to happen in the crowded lobby of a theater, but a strange premonition warned me that this stranger was somehow connected with this affair.

He had every appearance of being a gentleman of the first water, and I could not find any logical reason for my suspicions. Still, I reflected, this affair to date had given me no indications as to whether I was arrayed against might of finance or physique.

We reached the street almost simultaneously, and it was with difficulty that I kept from being observed. Miss Burgess summoned a waiting taxi, and I turned my attention to the man whom I instinctively distrusted. He, too, had called a car. While I was not near enough to overhear his directions, I could gather from his gestures that he was instructing the driver to trail Miss Burgess' car. My impulses were leading me into an adventure with a vengeance. My suspicions regarding the stranger were not without foundation after all.

All my reluctance at the thought of breaking my promise to Miss Burgess fled with the increasing possibility of attendant danger. I was resolved, now, to follow on and see this thing through at all costs. I fretted and fumed as I waited for my machine to arrive. It would be all right, I decided, for me to indulge in this escapade. My chauffeur was discreet and would be willing to lend a hand, should I need him.

"Keep that other car in sight," I instructed, indicating the tail-lights of the receding automobile, "and keep out of sight yourself."

He nodded, and we sped along on the trail of the other machines. I hadn't the slightest idea where we were bound. I was still under the distinct impression that I could be of some service to the one who had summoned me at the call of the dragon ring. That was enough for me,

all the incentive I needed to persuade me to follow on, irrespective of where the trail might lead. On we rode, until we had left the lights of Boston well behind. Finally I noticed that we were slowing down.

"The car ahead has stopped just this side of an old house up the line," the chauffeur told me through the tube. "I can see the tail-lights of another machine that's stopped directly in front of the house."

"Drive right on, past them both," I directed, "and when you get a way down the road, stop."

We passed the stranger's machine, which was drawn up at the side of the road. I could see that he was still inside. As we drew up to the house I strained my eyes to get a better view of things. It was well back from the road, and was flanked on either side by a heavy growth of underbrush and trees. I soon discovered the reason for the stranger remaining in his car. On the steps of the old mansion stood the trim figure of Miss Burgess, evidently waiting to be admitted. She must have had dismissed her taxi, for the driver had turned and was heading his car towards the city. We drove along until we rounded a bend in the road, and the chauffeur brought the machine to a standstill.

Alighting and directing my man to wait until I returned, I picked my way cautiously back towards the old dwelling. I kept to the shadows as far as possible, as I neared my goal, but in spite of my caution I barely avoided a collision with the man I trailed as he emerged from the bushes just ahead. The auto that had brought him to the scene was no longer in sight. He seemed quite unaware that any one might be following, and it proved an easy matter to observe his every move.

Fate must have directed my footsteps, for, while the stranger was constantly stepping upon dry, cracking twigs, or stumbling over loose stones, I had so far escaped them. A single misstep on my part would have been fatal.

With an ease born of long experience, the intruder noiselessly raised a window in the rear of the house. Silently he drew himself up, inch by inch, until his body was half over the sill, his legs left dangling awkwardly outside.

It was a case of now or never. Once he reached the inside of the house, I would be helpless to lend any assistance. With a single bound I was upon him. There was a crash and a shower of broken glass, as a flying fist crashed through the half-opened window. He lost his grip upon the sill, and we dropped to the ground together, his huge bulk nearly crushing the wind out of me.

In the moment's respite that followed my breathlessness, his hand darted out behind him and I saw the gleam of cold steel in the moonlight as his revolver flashed before my startled eyes. But I struck his wrist up just in the nick of time. A second later, and I would have been in a far, far distant land. The echo of the shot reverberated with enough volume to rouse the dead.

I had no time to speculate on what was going on inside the house. I more than had my hands full with my opponent. He was a great deal heavier than I would have guessed, and lithe and wiry as a panther. As long as I could maintain my grip upon his wrist, the revolver was of no use to him, so I concentrated all my energy upon keeping the weapon out of harm's way. As I have hinted, my lucky star must have been in the ascendancy this night, for as we swayed to and fro, locked in a mighty embrace, he backed into the fallen trunk of a tree. In a twinkling I had thrown him, and in another the revolver was in my possession.

"Now get up!" I ordered peremptorily. "And be careful that you keep your distance. I would have no more compunction about shooting you than I would some mangy dog."

Then there came an interruption.

"Just toss away that gun, if you please; then put your hands up above your head, and keep them there!"

It was the voice of Miss Burgess that rang out, authoritatively, behind me. I saw the stranger's hands shoot upwards, and, tossing my weapon in the direction of the voice, I followed suit.

"Now, if you gentlemen will be so kind as to step into the light, I would be interested to know what this is all about."

I turned, my hands still high above my head, and found myself looking into the muzzle of an efficient-looking thirty-two. It described an unwavering half-circle, covering both of us, and we followed Miss Burgess silently, as she made for the front of the house. As we stepped into the path, the light from the road made the scene as brilliant as if it were mid-day.

"Pray tell me what is the meaning of all this? Why, Mr. Brent, is it really you?" she interrupted. "There's no need for you to keep your hands up any longer. On second thought, you'd better go back and retrieve that revolver I made you throw away. I'll keep this other gentleman quiet until you return."

I did as she bade me, and came back quickly, to find their positions unchanged.

"How came you to get mixed up in this affair to-night, Mr. Brent?" she questioned.

I recounted all that had happened since I had first espied her in the theater.

"I apologize for breaking my agreement in regard to keeping away from you," I concluded, "but I felt that the circumstances justified me in following along."

"You have rendered me a service that quite offsets any rules you may have broken," she avowed. "There has been no harm done. I do not live here. My business at hand simply required that I make this trip to-night; that is all." Then, turning: "Marion," she called to some one inside, "have you a few yards of clothes-line that I may use?"

In reply, a middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway, a coil of heavy rope in her hands.

"If you will get that for me, Mr. Brent"—then, as I returned, bearing the cord; to the stranger: "Just put your hands behind your back, if you please. Remember, I can shoot as straight as any one you ever knew, Mr. Man! Now, if you will tie his hands, Mr. Brent—— Thank you, ever so much. Once more I assure you that the service you have rendered to-night is a very great one. I can handle this gentleman very nicely now. Good-night, Mr. Brent, until I see you again."

I took this as a dismissal and started down the path to where my car was waiting. As I turned into the road, I looked back just in time to see the mysterious stranger enter the house under the persuasive influence of Miss Burgess' revolver. She followed him, and the door closed behind them. I felt my newly acquired weapon nestling snugly in my hip pocket, and it was with quite a degree of assurance that I directed my driver to take me home.

CHAPTER FIVE

A THREAT AND AN INTRUSION

I HAD been reckless enough to carry the packet of documents on my person since they had been entrusted to me. After the incident of the night before, I decided that it was quite necessary to procure a safer hiding place

for them. The next question was where they could be hidden and yet be safe from any prying eyes.

At last I hit upon the following scheme. At one of the places where the wall-paper overlapped, I loosened the paper with painstaking care. Then, even more carefully, I scraped away just enough of the plastering so that the packet would fit without causing the paper to bulge, yet not enough to allow it to slip down. A little flour-and-water paste, and the job was complete. I inspected the result and concluded that an expert would be unable to tell that anything had been tampered with. The ring remained to be concealed.

I turned a small tabourette upside-down, and hollowed out enough of one of its legs to allow the admission of the ring. I fastened this in place with a double-headed tack. It was not as well hidden as the documents, but I was satisfied it was in a place where one would be unlikely to look for it, and I took the further precaution of utilizing the tabourette to hold a large pot of ferns that had adorned my center table. Next I cleaned up the debris, and felt much relieved, now that my charges were disposed of safely.

Quite naturally I was late in getting down to the office. As a matter of fact, I was barely in time to be on hand to receive an out-of-town buyer who was rated as one of the big customers of the firm. When a man is after big business he can scarcely stand on ceremony as to business hours. When R. F. Fitzgerald himself proposed that I dine with him that evening, I saw no other course open but to accept his invitation. By the time I got around to my routine work it was so far ahead of me that it took me the biggest part of the day to get caught up with it. So it was that closing time came before I hardly realized it could be any later than mid-afternoon.

A hurried trip to my apartments, where I cleaned up a bit and changed my clothes, and I was off to meet Fitzgerald. Rudolph Fitzgerald was one of the few really big men whose business required the raw materials that my firm handled. It was decidedly unusual for him to bother with the trade at all, his custom being generally to leave the details of the business with his subordinates. So you see, the very presence of this man spoke of something in the wind. An invitation to dine with R. F. Fitzgerald was something to be coveted by one in my position.

It was a wonderful dinner. From a cocktail to demitasse it left nothing to be desired. R. F. punctuated the meal with occasional references to my father, whom he had known quite well, but for the most part the conversation was confined to commonplaces.

It was not until the last of the dishes were cleared away and we were entrenched behind two big, black cigars that we settled down to business.

I put forth the best efforts of which I was capable, and before we had finished our first cigars I had written up an order so tremendously large that it staggered me. I knew it was by far the largest single order that had ever been written for the firm. At his suggestion we had gone up to his suite of rooms, and I was just about to light up my second cigar, when he rather jolted my visions of hooking the biggest fish I had had on my line.

"Brent," he purred, "before we consider this order as closed, there is a little matter I would like to discuss with you."

His attitude reminded me of a sleek, well-fed cat, who toys with a mouse she has captured just for the sake of seeing it struggle. I don't know just how I gained that impression, but I couldn't seem to banish the comparison from my mind.

"If it is a question of price, Mr. Fitzgerald, I assure you——"

"Tut-tut, my boy; you couldn't do better by me on price. No; it's something altogether different. You might say that it had no direct bearing on the business we have been discussing, but as the entire order hinges on it, I feel I can safely class it as a part of the proposition."

I confess I was becoming sorely puzzled.

"I don't understand to what you refer."

"You will in a minute, Mr. Brent, if you'll give me a chance to explain. Listen to me. I know that you have in your possession a packet of papers that are absolutely worthless to you. I represent interests to whom those documents are all-important. We are prepared to leave no stone unturned in our efforts to acquire them, but first I wanted to give you an opportunity to turn them over to us of your own accord. My proposition is simply this: If you will turn that packet of documents over to me within the next twenty-four hours, the order that I have just given you stands. Otherwise I will not only cancel it, but promise that I will use whatever influence I may have to turn trade in some other direction."

I was well-nigh stunned by this revelation. Truly, Miss Burgess had been right when she assured me that I greatly underestimated the forces against which I had pitted myself. I was stung to the quick by the offer that had just been made. It was nothing more or less than out-and-out bribery, and he had not even had the grace to attempt to camouflage it in any way, shape or manner.

I might be tricked, but I was beyond the temptation of a bribe, alluring though the prize might be. I fully realized the effect on my business, should this man wield his tremendous power against me, but I was pledged by the sign of the dragon ring, and I would be loyal to my trust at any cost.

"What under the sun are you driving at? All this talk of mysterious papers and documents savors some movie serial plot. You sound like the villain in 'Bertha, the Cloak Model,' or some such tommy-rot."

"It's no use for you to pretend ignorance of the affair. I tell you, we know that you have these papers in your care."

I rose with as much dignity as I could assume.

"You will pardon me for suggesting it, Mr. Fitzgerald, but I fear the wine you had with your dinner must have gone to your head. I had better bid you good-evening."

"As you wish, Brent." His tone hardened noticeably. "My offer still holds. You have twenty-four hours in which to make up your mind. Remember," he added, ominously, "should you choose to match your wits against ours, we have the power to crush you as one might crush an ant beneath his heel, and crush you we will!"

I left the hotel, my mind filled with all sorts of forebodings. My willingness to jump blindly into this affair, my abominable habit of yielding to my impulses, was due to prove more costly than I had ever realized.

Already I had incurred the enmity of one who was directly responsible for ten per cent of our annual business. A man with an influence far-reaching enough to sway another ten per cent whatever way he chose. I realized that his was no idle threat, and I mentally quavered as I pictured the business difficulties he had it in his power to make for me.

Not only that, but I had no way of knowing just what other powers he had lined up on his side. He had said that he represented 'interests' that would use any means, so long as they attained the ends they desired. I fear I shivered, involuntarily, as I tried to figure the magni-

tude of 'interests' that could use Rudolph Fitzgerald for an errand-boy.

But youth is optimistic, and I had not reached my apartments before this line of reckoning had given way to another. If a mere slip of a girl like Anita Burgess could see no reason why I, a descendant of a long line of pioneers and adventurers, would not be able to hold my own. I had wished for adventure, and now that I was getting my wish, where could I find good cause to complain? I had worked myself into a much more cheerful frame of mind by the time I let myself into my apartments. But my none too tranquil nerves were due for yet another shock.

My rooms looked as if they had been visited by a desert sand-storm. They were a prize picture of chaos and disorder. Whoever my nocturnal visitor had been, he had attended to the task of ransacking my things with a thoroughness that bespoke worlds of experience at the job.

The floor around the desk was littered with letters and papers, the table-drawer was half opened, its contents strewn recklessly over the place. Chairs were overturned, pictures taken from their places on the wall, the bureau-drawers were open and my clothes scattered in a tangled mess around the bed-room. Every article in the room had come in for its share of attention. The intruder had even gone so far as to slit the mattress on the bed in an attempt to locate what he sought.

In spite of the completeness of the upheaval, the packet of documents was still safely resting in its niche in the wall, and the ring had remained unfound. I thanked my lucky stars that I had taken time to dispose of them in this way. A less carefully prepared hiding-place, and the package would surely have been among the missing.

A half-opened window and a convenient fire escape was enough to show how my place had been entered. I silently resolved to have a burglar alarm installed before the next day came to an end. I would take no more chances, rest assured of that, as this business was taking a decidedly serious aspect. It took me well into the night to put the room into any semblance of order, but the events of the evening had driven all thought of sleep from my mind.

I was handicapped by the oath of secrecy and I did not dare to report this matter to the police because of the publicity that such a proceeding would entail. No, it was to be a battle of wits, and I must fight it alone.

But was I fighting it alone? I had gotten into the tangle to help Miss Burgess in her trouble, so by the same token why couldn't I count her as an ally? Her assistance might prove invaluable before this matter reached its culmination. The thought strengthened and stimulated me. The deeper I got into this matter, the higher my admiration rose for her courage. The incident of the night before commanded my attention, and I wondered what had occurred after I left the scene. What had gone on between the mysterious stranger and his fair captor? The more I puzzled over this affair, the further away I seemed to get from any adequate solution of the mystery that enshrouded the incident.

What was the nature of the documents in the packet in my keeping? Why should men of the caliber of R. F. Fitzgerald and his associates be so anxious to gain possession of it? What influence had drawn Anita Burgess so deeply into the affair? It was as complex as a Chinese puzzle. The dragon ring was leading me into a maze from which it was becoming increasingly difficult to extricate myself.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON RING

COINCIDENCE was not responsible for a strikingly handsome girl being in the same restaurant as myself on the following day. She accounted for that sensation I had experienced of being followed from my apartments to the café. Of course, I had no suspicion that she had any business with me, until she came over and sat down at my table.

"Mr. Chester Brent?" she interrogated.

I sipped my coffee thoughtfully, and answered with a nod. The girl was an utter stranger, yet I had the distinct impression of having seen her somewhere before. The waiter appeared, and while she was ordering I took the opportunity of studying her carefully. I instinctively assumed that she was in some way connected with the dragon mystery (as I had begun to classify the chain of events in my own mind) and I waited for her to announce her purpose.

Perhaps she was an emissary from Fitzgerald. I had heard nothing from him all day, and the time allowed for my decision was practically at an end. If she was, I admired his choice. She was a decided brunette, dark-skinned, with carefully moulded features. Indeed, the olive tint of her skin and a slight accent when she addressed me, conveyed the impression that she was of foreign extraction. The waiter hurried off to fill her order, and she directed her attention to me again.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Brent. I came in here to dine to-night, and it is so extremely lonely, dining alone, don't you think so? I saw you, also alone, and took the liberty of joining you. I hope you are not offended?"

"Not in the least," I parried. I knew there was some deeper motive in her actions than a mere desire for companionship. I was slightly disappointed that she had not offered some more plausible excuse to defend her move.

Her eyes narrowed, and she eyed me piercingly, as though to determine my seriousness. The scrutiny must have satisfied her, for she went on:

"That is fine. We shall have a delightful dinner together."

"And afterwards?"

"We shall let the afterwards shape its own course, shall we not, Mr. Brent?"

She toyed with one of the forks, drumming idly with it on the edge of the table. Was it merely a trick of my imagination, or did that tap-tap-tapping of the fork resolve itself into measured beats and pauses, some sort of pre-arranged signaling? Nonsense; of course not! The sound would not carry twenty feet away, and the adjoining tables were unoccupied.

"As you choose. I only anticipated a pleasurable evening in your company, unless, of course, you have other plans."

She hesitated.

"No, not exactly that. After all, I could spend my evening in much less desirable company."

It was my turn to pause. I gazed at her intently until politeness forced me to remove my eyes from hers, but I could detect nothing except mere banter in either her tone or manner.

"Thank you. With such an unconventional beginning everything certainly seems most propitious for a rather unusual evening."

I don't know whether it was the remark or the arrival of the waiter that silenced her. When she spoke again her attitude had changed.

"Do you know, Mr. Brent, I have heard a great deal about you lately."

"Really? What, pray tell, has been the reason for my sudden popularity? Or is it some sort of notoriety instead?"

"Perhaps neither. It happens, sometimes, that a friend may speak well of one to an equally close friend, you know."

That remark left me rather up in the air.

"And that mutual friend?"

"From what I have heard your circle of those you count as friends is not so large but what you should easily guess."

I confess she was proving more than a match for me, but I did not dare venture to volunteer too much information until I understood her connection in this tangle.

When I lapsed into silence she regarded me with her lips curling into an amused smile, and the meal continued in absolute silence. I ventured to think that her desire for companionship was easily satisfied, but wisely kept my thoughts to myself and waited for her to make the next move.

"Your attitude during dinner reminds me of a turtle," she told me as the meal drew to a close.

"In what way?"

"Why, when a turtle tires of his associates he simply draws up into his shell and stays there."

"My silence you mean?" and she nodded. "It was simply a case of not being able to think of anything that might interest you. By the way, now that dinner is nearly through, what next?"

"I have a somewhat unconventional favor to ask of you."

Now it was coming. I had known all along her flimsy claim of lonesomeness was crude camouflage.

"I make no rash promises."

"It is just this, Mr. Brent. There is a little matter I wish to discuss with you, but I wish to be sure that I am safely sheltered from prying eyes and ears. I wonder if you could take me to your apartments? We would be perfectly safe there."

"Perhaps we would and perhaps we wouldn't. Bachelor apartments are hardly the place to entertain an unchaperoned young lady. It would be a case of smuggle you in and smuggle you out, and should you be discovered there would be the very devil to pay."

"I am prepared to meet just such a contingency as you mention. I quite agree that a young lady such as myself could hardly expect to visit a gentleman's apartments alone and at night. But a young man—a boy? Surely, there could be no objections to your bringing home a young male friend?"

"Then you mean——"

"You get my idea exactly; I mean that I shall accompany you to your rooms, but dressed as a boy. It is feasible, even though it is a trifle out of the ordinary. There we can talk things over freely."

She marked my reluctance to decide, opened her bag and took out a card, which she dropped on the table in front of me. I looked down upon the now familiar red seal, marked with the insignia of the dragon, and my hesitancy vanished in a flash.

"As you desire," I assented, "if you think the plan can be carried out successfully."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it. First I must trouble you to take me to Boule's. As you probably are aware, he is a costumer—rents fancy costumes for masquerades and such things, you know."

I paid the waiter, summoned a waiting taxi, and in a few minutes we drew up in front of Boule's.

She asked me to wait in the taxi until she returned, and it seemed scarcely a quarter hour when she was again beside me in the machine. The change was so complete that I hardly knew her myself for the charming young lady who had left me such a short time before. As a boy she was even more prepossessing than she was as a girl, and she had told the truth when she said she was prepared for this move. Everything must have been laid out for her in anticipation of just such a procedure. No one, in the semi-darkness of the evening, could ever have detected that she was not the young man she was supposed to be.

Again that feeling swept over me that I had seen her somewhere before, but I brushed it lightly aside and wondered what message Miss Burgess was sending by this stranger, and why she had been unable to deliver it in person.

"You look great," I told my new-found "gentleman friend." "You'd pass muster anywhere."

She smiled.

"Many difficulties are easily surmounted, Mr. Brent, when one is prepared to cope with them. It was necessary that I make this trip to your apartments, therefore it was equally necessary that I be prepared to make it in safety."

"But suppose I had refused to countenance your proposition?"

"Then I was prepared to use this leverage to overbalance your objections."

There, gleaming in the palm of her hand, was the dragon ring I had last seen on the finger of Anita Burgess. My friend was not lacking in credentials; first the card, then the ring itself. We arrived at the apartments without incident, and made our way up the stairs.

"You will have to excuse the appearance of the place," I apologized as we entered, "but I had a surreptitious visitor last evening, who nearly wrecked the place, and I haven't had ample opportunity to straighten things out as yet."

"You mean that your rooms were broken into?"

"Exactly." I told her of the condition of the room upon my return the night before, concluding: "But they didn't succeed in finding the articles I have reason to believe was the sole object of the intrusion."

"Then they are still safe?"

"You mean the documents? Yes. As safe as when I first took charge of them."

Under the bright light of the electric bulbs my "boy" visitor looked doubly attractive. Her well-rounded figure and dark skin and eyes fitted her new rôle to perfection. I saw her eyes glisten as I mentioned the papers.

"I'm so glad they are safe. I feared, when you spoke of the attempted robbery, that they had succeeded in getting them away from you."

"No; I had them safely hidden. Now, may I ask what business brings you here to-night that could not be transacted outside of my rooms?"

"I came for that package we have just been talking about."

I remembered Miss Burgess' instructions: "I may find it impossible to call for the package in person. Do not let it leave your possession on any pretext, unless the one who demands it is wearing the ring I now wear," and the claimant had not only produced the ring, but one of those odd cards with which Miss Burgess had twice presented me.

"I don't quite see the necessity of this masquerade. Why not have had me deliver the package to you at some point outside?"

"Because I will not be suspected of acting as intermediary in this affair, whereas, if you attempted to carry

it on your person there would be danger of its falling into other hands."

"Do you happen to know what disposal is to be made of it?" I wanted to be absolutely certain that I was doing right before I relinquished it. I couldn't rid myself of that sense of uncertainty that had swept over me at the idea of giving this girl the packet, although she had the dragon ring, and I could think of no reason for doubting her. Of course, the incident had been out of the ordinary, but, for that matter, so had the whole affair.

"Only that I am to take it direct to headquarters," she replied.

I decided that everything must be O. K. I could harbor no further doubts but what Miss Burgess had sent her for the documents. I would deliver them into her keeping, and my visitor watched me interestedly as I loosened the wall-paper and drew the packet from its hiding-place.

"Cleverly done, Mr. Brent," she complimented me. "No wonder your intruder failed to locate them."

"It seemed to baffle him just a little."

The jangle of the telephone in the next room interrupted me. The phone was on a stand near enough to the bed to make it handy if I had any night calls.

I thrust the packet of papers into my pocket.

"If you will pardon me for just a moment?"

"Surely. Run right along."

I vanished into the bed-room and snatched the receiver from the hook, savagely.

As I listened to the voice that came over the wire, my manner changed. I listened breathlessly, intent on catching every word.

"Is Mr. Chester Brent there?"

"This is Mr. Brent speaking."

"This is Miss Burgess—Anita Burgess," the voice went on. "I have been trying to get in touch with you all evening. Do not let those documents get out of your hands one single instant until I can see you again. My dragon ring—the one my father gave me, you know—has been stolen!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTO THE LION'S DEN

MISS BURGESS' conversation came to an abrupt termination when I heard the clink of the receiver as it fell into place at the other end of the wire. The message had so startled me that I stood rooted to the spot, the receiver still held to my ear, until the operator's "Number, please," roused me to action.

The warning had arrived just in time, for a few moments later damage would have been done. The impostor in the other room would have gained her objective—the documents entrusted to me would have been irretrievably lost. I shuddered as I realized how nearly I had made the fatal mistake of giving her the bundle.

A sudden flash of recognition, and I knew where I had previously encountered the masquerader. She was the young lady with whom my mysterious stranger of two evenings before had been talking when I had first noticed him in the foyer of the theater.

I mentally cursed myself as several varieties of idiot for not having remembered her at sight. Still, it had been only a fleeting glimpse of her, so perhaps I was not altogether to blame. Simultaneously a more sinister thought occupied my attention. The legend connected with the ring came back to me. "Should one of the rings be stolen, the charm gave way to a curse, and sudden death would assuredly be meted out to the perpetrator." I thought of the two incidences in which I knew of the working out of the superstition, and I wondered which one of us was to be the victim. The thought of this dark-haired beauty coming to an untimely end was most disconcerting, even though she was one of the elements of danger I was facing.

Thoughts travel fast, and all this had taken but a mere fraction of the time it takes to tell it. Since the fight at the country home I had carried the revolver that I had then acquired, and the feel of it, as my hand stole intuitively to my pocket, reassured me. I felt myself equal to any situation that might arise. It was evident that the girl's suspicions were not aroused. She was still in the big chair where I had left her, looking over a copy of some magazine she had chosen from the stand. My first precaution was to cross the room, placing myself so as to be between the girl and the door.

"Nothing of any importance," I told her. "Just some one with time to kill and a telephone handy. I pleaded important business, and rang off."

"Then suppose we get back to the matter at hand," she suggested. "It is getting rather late, and I should be going. If I may have that package——"

She paused abruptly. I had backed to the door, and the sound of the tumblers in the lock as I turned the key, surprised her. Then she rose, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Exactly what do you mean by doing that, Mr. Brent?"

I took the key from the lock and put it in my pocket before I replied.

"It means, my unknown friend, that it is my turn to do a little dictating. I would thank you to hand over that dragon ring that was stolen earlier in the evening."

She drew herself stiffly erect. Her black eyes narrowed until they were mere slits. Instantly she was on the defensive. There was no trace of fear, no hint of timidity in her manner. I could almost picture, in her stead, a tawny panther at bay, crouched ready for a final spring upon those who sought to destroy her.

"Do you mean to imply that I——"

"I mean to imply nothing; I mean to accuse. The owner of that ring has just informed me of its theft. The ring is in your possession. I can draw but one logical conclusion."

"So that was the nature of your 'unconsequential' telephone call?"

"Your power of intellect does you credit, my fair friend."

Again her eyes flashed belligerently.

"It is quite possible that I might refuse to comply with your request."

"As a lever, cold steel is often quite as effective as a talisman."

She did not even quiver as she found herself looking down the barrel of my weapon, and said coolly:

"Granted. In some cases a more powerful leverage is required than others, Mr. Brent. Are you quite sure your particular lever is equal to its task?"

She was slowly retreating in the direction of the window that opened onto the fire-escape.

"I think it would be more conducive to your welfare if you didn't exhibit such a roving tendency. I think you had better be seated. Your familiarity with the exits here leads me to believe that perhaps you may have seen these apartments before."

She took the chair I indicated before she parried:

"It is my turn to congratulate you upon your keenness of intellect."

So here was my intruder of the night before! In spite of the fact that she was aligned against me, I could not help but feel a growing admiration for her prowess and courage.

"It might interest you to know that since your previous visit I have taken the precaution to install the protection of a burglar alarm. Another such attempt would only succeed in arousing the household."

"'Since your previous visit'," she mimicked, with a tantalizing smile. "My, but don't we take a lot for granted this evening. And aren't we progressive. I should apply to you for lessons in locking the barn-door after the horse has been stolen."

Her banter was goading me to distraction. My rising anger must have been reflected in my expression, for she laughed heartily.

"But in this case the 'horse' wasn't stolen," I reminded her.

"True enough, although it nearly got out of the stable in spite of your elaborate system of 'alarms.' They didn't succeed in keeping me out after all, you see."

"I still have the package." I inwardly regretted that its hiding-place was revealed. Should a future opportunity be afforded for a search of the apartments, I feared I could devise no place of concealment where I would feel it was safely disposed of. "Once more I must ask you to give me that ring."

"Suppose I should scream?" she suggested. "If I remember rightly, it was you who mentioned that bachelor apartments were hardly the place for a young lady to be found, alone, at this hour."

"Then I should be forced to the unpleasant necessity of turning you over to the authorities. Sneak-thieves are not uncommon in apartment houses, and the fact that you are in boy's clothes precludes the possibility of your being able to offer a logical alibi."

I had drawn up a chair, and sat facing her, being careful to keep the drop upon her. Behind her banter I sensed her desperation and I knew that, should the slightest opportunity present itself, she would stake her all in a wild attempt to regain her freedom. It was my turn to take the initiative.

"Might I suggest that all this talk is getting us nowhere? Don't you think you might just as well hand over that ring now, as an hour from now? Thank you. I felt sure you would see the wisdom of it sooner or later."

She glared at me vindictively as the ring changed hands.

"What is it your pleasure to do with me? It is highly improbable that you intend to detain me here all night."

"Quite true. It is also highly improbable that I shall turn you loose to set Lord only knows how many cut-throats after my life before morning."

"You have your burglar alarms," ironically.

"And just at present I have you, which I consider an hundred-fold more protection than all the burglar alarms in the world."

"May I inquire what use the captor intends to make of the prisoner?"

"You may. I was about to tell you, anyway. I understood you to say that your intentions were to take this package," I tapped my pocket significantly, "direct to headquarters."

"Those were my instructions."

"Suppose, then, that you obey those instructions. I would hate to be the one to stand in the way of so admirable a young lady's execution of the task entrusted to her. Of course, it will be wiser if they remain in my possession in transit. You see, my fair unknown, I have rather a strong inclination to find out just where the 'headquarters' you spoke of might be."

"You would dare?"

"Why not? When my own rooms are not safe from intrusion, I figure I will be just as secure elsewhere, and you will agree with me, I am sure, that to do the unexpected always gives one a decided advantage; for example, your visit here this evening. I confess, had it not been for that telephoned warning, you would have accomplished your mission with the utmost ease."

"If you insist, Mr. Brent, I suppose I have no other course to pursue. I warn you, fairly and squarely, that you will regret forcing me into doing this thing."

I suppose I was foolhardy in the extreme to propose such a venture. Walking boldly into the lion's den is by no means likely to prove a bed of roses. But I was riled. The gullibility with which I had walked into the trap set for me, and the narrowness of my escape, stung me into a rashness that allowed of no prudence or caution.

"I shall have to ask you to step into the other room with me while I telephone for a taxi."

She silently obeyed. I placed her advantageously in front of me while I called up the taxi-cab office and ordered a car sent up immediately.

Getting into my top-coat and still maintaining the advantage the revolver afforded me was quite a task. I was painfully awkward about it, but the main thing is that I accomplished it without mishap. Then I concealed the revolver in the outside right-hand pocket of the ulster, but still kept it to bear upon my captive.

"Remember," I cautioned her, "although this revolver is out of sight, I can shoot as well through the cloth of this coat as if it was not in the way. While I would regret shooting at a woman, if the necessity should arise—"

The significance of the pause was not lost upon her.

"You threaten rather melodramatically, I am sure," she proclaimed. "What, pray, must I do to avoid the sensation of a bullet in my brain—though my capture leads me to doubt if I have one."

"Simply take me back, or let me take you back, to 'headquarters.' As I suggested before, I am anxious to learn more about your superiors in this matter. You interest me only as a means to that end. It is the men higher up who command my attention."

I suppose the remark was rather brutal. If looks would kill, the one she flashed me would have sealed my doom. As it was, I dreaded the consequences should she succeed in regaining the upper hand. Wound a woman in body or in soul and chances are equal that you may be forgiven; wound her pride and she will seek vengeance for the rest of her days.

"Bear in mind that if I even so much as suspect you of double-crossing me, your apparent freedom will be at an end."

I had transferred the all-important package to the inside pocket of my suit-coat. I felt that it was as safe there as it would be left unconcealed about the rooms. I had also appropriated several yards of heavy cord on the chance that it might be of some use before the night was over. Then the taxi arrived, and my prisoner in the lead, we descended the stairs.

The address she gave the chauffeur surprised me. It was in one of the most exclusive sections in all the city.

Once inside the machine she lapsed into sullen taciturnity. Night rides, I reflected, were becoming a habit. We drew up in front of an imposing residence which bore all the earmarks of being closed for an indefinite period. The windows were boarded, the lawn was unkempt and neglected, the grounds were shrouded in absolute darkness. The general effect was that of some cold, dead thing. No sign of life was visible. A starless, overcast sky, that gave promise of an approaching storm,

lent added solemnity to the scene. I paid the driver, and we watched the lights of the receding machine vanish into the darkness.

"The main task that confronts you, young lady, is to arrange things so that I can see and hear all that goes on without being seen or heard myself. Is this the place?"

She chose to maintain her attitude of silence, and replied with an answering nod.

I felt like a maurader as I followed her into the pitch-black darkness of the grounds. Lest she find some chance to elude me in the darkness, I held to her coat-tails with my free hand much as a blind man would cling to his leader for guidance and protection. The other hand still kept its grip upon the revolver that bulged in my pocket until we reached a side entrance to the dwelling, and the girl produced a key which she fitted to the lock. I drew the weapon from under cover. If I was going into this darkened house I would be prepared for emergencies.

"Follow me closely," she whispered as we stepped into the inky blackness of the hallway. "Perhaps you had best keep hold on my coat."

"I will be right at your heels, and so will this." I prodded her with the muzzle of my revolver and trailed her through three or four spacious rooms, lighted only by an occasional moonbeam that found its way through the apertures in the boarded-up windows. She steered me deftly around the dust-laden furniture without bumping against anything. It gave me an eerie feeling, this owl-like ability of hers to see in the dark. My own eyes were becoming used to the dense darkness, and I could begin to distinguish the objects we passed more clearly.

We were making our way towards the center of the mansion. At last a light gleamed from behind drawn portieres. A tug at her coat checked the speed of my leader, but the caution was needless. The room, though brilliantly lighted, was empty. I noticed the spick and span cleanliness of the room, in striking contrast to the dusty, musty unused apartments we had passed through in reaching it. Its luxurious furnishings were well in keeping with the house itself; heavy draperies at the windows and doors, thick carpets that rendered our steps noiseless, well appointed furniture. Whoever owned them was not only wealthy, but was possessed of marvelously good taste in his selections. All in all, the room was a study in harmony.

"The man I expected to meet here has evidently not arrived," the girl volunteered, sinking into a comfortable-looking rocker.

"Then we shall wait for him," I said, preparing to take my place opposite.

A moment later the sound of a closing door brought me to my feet again.

"That must be him now," she whispered.

The room opened into another that was as dark as the rest of the house had been, and I drew the heavy draperies across the doorway, muttering:

"Behind these curtains I can observe all that is going on. Any inkling that I am here, or any false move on your part will prove your undoing." I retreated to the protection of the draperies as the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon our ears. Nearer and nearer they came until I knew their owner must be directly outside the room where the girl lay idly in her chair.

The curtains at the other end of the room parted, and a man stepped into the light. He was the same one I had first seen her talking with in the theater; the mysterious stranger whose hands I had tied and left at the mercies of Anita Burgess at the house in the country two nights before.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CURSE OF THE RING

THE man swept the room with one comprehensive glance, took in the figure of the erstwhile boy in the rocker, and gave vent to his feelings with a low whistle.

"You're some sketch in that rig, Julia, believe me."

She gave him an icy stare.

"'Miss Sabastino,' if you please."

"'As you like it,' as the old bard would say."

I sensed a feeling of animosity between them. It was evident from the man's attitude that he was in a position to give the girl orders, but her whole demeanor spoke of forced obedience. He converted the end of the table into a seat, and one foot beat a soundless tattoo upon the carpeted floor.

"Did you get my instructions this afternoon?"

"I wouldn't otherwise be here in this outlandish get-up," she flared.

Methodically he opened his cigarette case, selected one with care, lighted it without asking her permission, and blew several rings of blue smoke ceilingward before he continued:

"Did you meet with any degree of success last evening?"

"Don't talk to me of success," she snapped. "It's bad enough for me to have to do your dirty work without listening to your sarcasms. I waited here until nearly sunrise to report on last night's venture, but you couldn't even let me know you were not going to meet me. Bah!"

He waved his hand in an eloquent gesture.

"My dear young lady, if you had been in my predicament last evening, I doubt if even you would have been able to send any communications."

"You interest me. What was the dire calamity that befell you?"

"I had the somewhat doubtful pleasure of spending the night trussed up like a sack of potatoes. In fact, the night before and all of yesterday as well."

"I am surprised to think that a man of your much vaunted abilities should submit to such ignominious treatment!"

He swung angrily from the table and strode menacingly toward her.

"Damn you! Some day you'll rile me to a point where I shall kill you!"

The girl laughed tauntingly.

"But not so long as you have need of my services, signor. Come, calm yourself. Can't you see I can hardly wait to hear what you have been doing since you ran away from me in the theater?"

I wondered if she was really so desirous of learning what had happened, or whether she was drawing him out for my benefit. His anger passed as suddenly as it had risen, and he resumed his perch on the corner of the table. Then he sketched for her, briefly, his activities from the time I had left him facing Miss Burgess' revolver in the light from the road.

"Everything would have been as easy as rolling off a log if it hadn't been for the interference of that young pup Brent."

My blood boiled at this insult and my muscles tensed in silent rage, but I controlled myself with an effort, and listened as the girl queried:

"You let the Burgess girl take you inside?"

"I had little choice in the matter. Far be it from me to invite any one to indulge in target practice, with yours truly as the target. She took me up to an attic room, and between the two women had me hog-tied like a steer. That Burgess girl, the young demon, tried to make me

talk. You can guess how well she made out. She threatened all kinds of terrible punishments and tortures if I insisted on keeping silent, but that didn't worry me much. When it comes right down to brass tacks a woman is too squeamish and chicken-hearted to carry out her threats. So I stoutly refused to talk." His features twisted into a wry smile as he added: "They weren't very merciful about the way they tied me up. I haven't worked all the soreness out of my joints yet."

"But how did you manage to get away?"

"Oh, that part of it was easy enough, once the chance came. I had to eat, you know, and at meal times I had the delightful pleasure of Miss Burgess' companionship plus her revolver, while the other woman attended to loosening my hands and tying them up again. Yesterday noon the girl must have been out somewheres, and the old woman made the mistake of thinking she could manage me alone. Once my hands were free, the rest was simplicity itself. I overpowered her before she could make a sound. Oh, I didn't harm her," as a look of concern registered on the Italian girl's countenance, "I just tied her up as I had been, and left her there.

"My legs had been tied for so long that it was several minutes before I could use them. Then I went a-searching for whatever I might find. My supposition regarding the girl was a correct one. Except for the old woman upstairs the house was deserted. It was my turn to play in luck. On the table in one of the rooms downstairs I made a rare find. My capture must have made Miss Burgess careless in the extreme. She had gone off and left her hand-bag behind, and in that hand-bag I found the dragon ring and the cards I sent you."

So the girl was not the thief after all! The curse associated with the theft of the ring came back to me for the second time that night, and with it an inward relief that its working portended evil for some one beside the girl.

"I knew the value of my find, the new power the possession of this talisman gave me. The boss had told me of the significance of the dragon ring. In my hands, my find was useless. Brent knew me now as being lined up against him, so that as far as openly approaching him was concerned, my hands were tied. So I thought of you at once. You were unknown to him. In your hands the ring might be of intrinsic value. My next problem was to get them to you, with some sort of instruction for using them, before their loss was discovered. I set off down the road, bent on finding some town or village where I could communicate with the boss. It couldn't have been more than a mile and a half to the nearest town, but that last half mile was torture. My muscles rebelled at the task put upon them after their enforced vacation. The boss had a nice, hot, ready-made panning out to give me, but when I told him about finding the ring it sort of sweetened his temper. He told me about you falling down on your job last night, too. I only asked you to see what you'd have to say about it."

"After I'd entirely given you up," said the girl, "I phoned him at the number you gave me. I nearly wrecked the place, too, but not a packet of documents could I find. I'd liked to have seen that fellow's face when he got a look at the place. I certainly messed things up for him."

Beyond a doubt, she had! The man continued:

"The boss told me where I could reach you, but said that I'd better not try to see you in person, lest we be seen together by Brent or the girl. He told me to send you the cards and ring by messenger, and that he would instruct you in your part over the telephone."

As he talked the stranger smoked incessantly. All the windows were tightly closed, and the room was slowly filling with a blue, smoky haze. Gradually the rings of smoke drifted behind the draperies were I was concealed. The smoke alone would not have done it, but, combined as it was with the close, musty atmosphere of the unused room, I felt a growing, irrepressible desire to sneeze. The girl had not moved in her chair, except to draw one knee up between her clasped hands while she gave rapt attention to the stranger's tale.

"Yes, I received both the ring and the instructions. To a certain point they worked to perfection."

"Up 'to a certain point'," he sneered. "You don't mean to tell me that——"

I could not hold it back any longer. It was more than mere human nature could stand. I made an ineffectual attempt to smother it behind my hand.

"Ca-choo!"

The stranger bounded from the table as if shot from a cannon.

"What was that?" he fired the question at the girl.

Her face blanched white as snow and she shrank away from him as though she would like to merge herself with the upholstery of the chair she occupied, and recovered her poise almost instantly, but not before a lurking suspicion crossed his mind.

"How do you suppose I know?"

He gripped her arm and pulled her bodily from the chair.

"Rollo Bassino," she panted, "take your hand off my arm! Let me go at once! Let me go, do you hear?"

She winced as his grip tightened.

"I'll let you go when I get damned good and ready! Are you going to tell me who is hidden in that room or must I find out for myself? Is it some lover you have been meeting secretly, or some spy your treachery has allowed to take his place among us?"

Her face flushed hotly at his accusations.

"Very well then, find out for yourself—if you can. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

With an oath he literally flung the girl aside. Under the impetus she staggered drunkenly across the room and brought up against the further wall. The jar dislodged a large hanging-mirror, and it tumbled to the floor with a tremendous crash, the glass splintering into a thousand fragments.

He was crossing the room towards my hiding-place with tremendous strides. I steeled myself for the encounter that I knew was inevitable, and it struck me as rather a trick of Fate that I was armed with the same weapon I had taken from him two nights ago. I caught the reflection of light upon the automatic in his hand, and knew he had replaced his loss at the first opportunity.

If it was to be fight, I had every advantage on my side. From my location in the darkened room I could watch his every move, while he only knew that somewhere in the dark I was lying await for him. While I knew that he was armed he had no way of knowing whether I was or not. It remained for the girl to discount my superiority. I had forgotten her in my endeavor to keep an eye on the man, whose eyes gleamed insanely in the brilliant light of the room. Unseen, she made her way along the wall of the room. With one quick motion she threw aside the protecting draperies, and I stood revealed.

If I could help it, I didn't want to injure this man. If I could capture him unharmed, I would be in a fair way to gain some information I very much desired. I was quite handy with a revolver, and determined on attempting to shoot the automatic from the hand of the other man. If I should succeed, the rest would be comparatively easy. The girl I knew to be unarmed, and could I man-

age to disarm the man, I felt that I would be master of the situation. If I failed——

My finger tightened on the trigger as Bassino's gun came up into position. Again the girl changed the entire situation. As the hammer of the pistol shot home, she flung at me a small, half-filled gold-fish globe in an effort to deflect my aim. Her move was fatal for the man. The glancing blow, as the globe grazed my shoulder, was just enough to change the course of the bullet, but not enough to save the man who opposed me. Instead of shooting the weapon from his hand, as I had intended, the bullet chose a course straight as a die for the breast of its victim.

So quickly was the whole scene enacted, that he did not even have a chance to press the trigger. He stopped in his tracks, his fingers slowly relaxed, the automatic slipping through his nerveless fingers. He clutched at the wound, from which a tiny trickle of blood was already seeping. A few staggering steps forward, and he crumpled in a lifeless heap at my feet. Once more the curse of the dragon ring had been fulfilled.

CHAPTER NINE

ANITA TAKES A HAND

THE realization that I had shot the fellow being at my feet appalled me. True, I had only intended to disarm, at most disable, him; nevertheless, the fact remained that he was dead—that he had come to his death by my hand.

I gazed at the still smoking revolver in my hand; then, down at the inert form of the stranger I had mur—— No, no, not that! Killed in self-defense was better. I was dazed, overwhelmed with the enormity of my deed. The lethargy into which my self-introspection had plunged me proved my undoing.

Not for a moment had Julia Sabastino lost her self-possession. Bassino's automatic had scarce touched the floor when she thought to procure it. I came out of the stupor to find myself facing a determined-looking pistol, behind which was an equally determined girl.

"I think the tables are turned once more," she said. "Just drop that gun before you do some more damage."

Had she but known it, she could have taken it from me without the slightest resistance. I was entirely unnerved. For the moment my longing for adventure had departed absolutely. As a bad, bold, brave adventurer I was worth considerably less than a plugged nickel. Where was all the resourcefulness, the ability to extricate oneself from all sorts of pitfalls, that was supposed to be part and parcel of every hero's make-up? I fear I made a sorry hero. Given long, pointed ears and a tails, I could easily have been mistaken for a jackass. Recent events had followed one another in such bewildering confusion that my power to adjust myself to the kaleidoscopic conditions had been utterly exhausted. And to cap the climax I had killed a man!

For the time being I was an automaton, subject to the control of any will stronger than my own. I relinquished the revolver not because of any conscious effort on my part simply because the girl had willed me to drop it. I was in a state of self-imposed hypnosis, my mind dominated by that of Miss Sabastino's.

"Now, if you will back up a few steps while I obtain that gun. I'm taking no chances this time," the girl went on, coldly.

My action brought me to the edge of the darkened area behind me. Had I been in possession of normal faculties, I might have risked a dash for liberty into the unused portion of the house, trusting to luck to find some safe means of egress. As it was, I paused while she disposed of my weapon, previously the dead man's (I shuddered at the thought), by tucking it into the pocket of her coat.

"For the last time, Mr. Brent, I will ask you for those documents. I trust you will not have the heart to refuse me."

I handed them over as submissively as a punished child. In anticipation of her next request I extended the dragon ring.

"No, thank you." Her tone was bitter-sweet. "I do not need your passport now that I have these." She flaunted the documents tauntingly before my eyes. "That rope you brought with you was a happy thought, indeed. I doubt if I could have located any handy enough to be of any value. Must I ask you for it the second time? Oh, thank you. There is a nice, convenient, straight-back chair, Mr. Brent. You must be tired after standing for so long a time. My, my, how quickly you gather my meaning. We are getting on famously together, aren't we? Steady just a moment now, while I fasten these knots securely. Well done is twice done, so they say."

She had been deftly tying me to the chair as she talked, and when she finished I could not move a muscle.

"I see no need of adding to your difficulties by gagging you. If you should scream I'm sure the sound would not penetrate to the street. I dislike the thoughts of leaving you all alone, but I fear that I must. If you get lonely think of me. Your anger may dispel your lonesomeness. Now that he is out of the running"—at the reference to him her voice tinged with bitter scorn—"I suppose I've got to do his work as well and take these to the boss. If you don't liberate yourself before morning I promise to be generous and come back and set you free. Now I must bid you *adieu*."

I heard her receding footsteps and the slam of the door behind her. It was raining. The storm the cloudy sky had foretold had arrived. I could hear the patter of the raindrops as they beat against the boarded windows, while the wind whistled dismally outside.

A night alone with the dead! I don't think it was intention on her part, but the chair was back to the door by which we had entered the room, and placed at just such an angle that when I looked straight ahead, the grim, stark body of my victim was directly in my line of vision. The storm raging outside suggested my similarity to a ship in a storm at sea, battling with overpowering elements against which it was arrayed. That was it; I was a storm-tossed ship upon the bosom of the Sea of Life, and my adversaries were the tempest that was slowly bringing about my destruction.

Already our commercial business was feeling the effects of Fitzgerald's power, as only this afternoon we had received word from two of our oldest customers, who had kept a standing order with us for years, that beginning with the next month their business would be transferred to an opposing concern. And I knew this to be only the beginning.

The storm was gaining in violence, while the rain still beat against the window-boards, but it came in torrents now. I strained at my bonds with a sudden fury, and struggled desperately until the cords cut deep ridges into my wrists and ankles. At last I realized the futility of endeavoring, and gave up in hopeless despair. The slam of the outside door brought me bolt upright in my chair. Had the girl come back for something or other she had forgotten, or was this some new factor in the situation, some new danger that beset me? The click of heels upon

the bare floor was distinctly feminine, but the footsteps bore little resemblance to those of the Italian girl.

"Chester! Chester Brent!"

I must be dreaming! Could I believe my ears? If only it was really true!

"Here! This way!" I called into the darkness. "Can you find me?"

"Coming," sang out the voice, cheerily.

My optimism rose several degrees. My old-time confidence was returning by leaps and bounds. I heard the swish of skirts behind my chair, and in another moment Anita Burgess stood before me.

"The right-hand pocket of my inside coat. My knife."

She understood. A few quick slashes, and I was free.

"I saw you when you came in with the girl," she told me, "and I saw the man when he arrived. I thought I heard a pistol shot, and feared for your safety. When the girl came out alone I knew that something out of the ordinary had happened, for they always came out together. I let her get safely out of the way before I dared to leave my hiding-place in the shadows across the way. A skeleton key did the rest, and here I am. The man? Where has he gone?"

"Dead!" I indicated the body at the other end of the room. "I had to do it in self-defense. I didn't intend to kill him."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps it is just as well. At least he is one stumbling-block removed from our path."

"But how did you know I was coming here?"

"I didn't; that part of it was a surprise. It was the man I was lying in wait for, for I knew he had stolen my dragon ring. I knew that he met the girl here every night between eleven and twelve, for I had followed him here before. To-night I anticipated him."

"I have the ring." I took it from my pocket and gave it to her. "But the documents—the girl took them with her."

Miss Burgess wrinkled her brows thoughtfully.

"I think I know where she is bound. There is an even chance that we may be able to overtake her. My machine is waiting just a ways down the road. Are you still armed?"

"No; the girl took my revolver, too."

"I have an extra one in the automobile. Luckily I tossed it in at the last moment, as I feared losing the one I usually carry. Come, let us be off."

There was little need of further caution, so far as this house was concerned, so we wended our way through the maze of empty rooms until at last we stepped out into the night.

The tempest had reached the zenith of its fury, causing jagged flashes of lightning to leap across the sky, relieving, momentarily, the stygian blackness of the heavens. The thunder crashed and rolled in mighty, awe-inspiring detonations, like the roar of guns upon battlefields. A thunderstorm of such severity at this season of the year, when the autumnal winds were already making themselves felt and top-coats were appearing with increasing frequency, was extraordinary. In all probability it was the last storm of the season, and the elements seemed allied to give us one that we would be sure to remember.

How it did rain! Blinding sheets of it that bewildered, that one must battle against every step of the way. In spite of my protecting ulster I was soaked to the skin before we reached the runabout that waited only a short block away. I doubt if Miss Burgess, her long raincoat buttoned up under her chin, fared as ill at the hands of the storm as I. No chauffeur was waiting in the little machine at the corner, and Miss Burgess waved me into my seat, started the motor at the first turn of the crank, climbed into her place behind the wheel, put on the gear, and we plunged into the storm.

I fell to marveling at the versatility of the girl beside me. Fearless, cool and collected in an emergency; capable of handling a situation that would deviate stouter hearts from their tasks; her familiarity with firearms; and now the masterful way in which she drove the car over the slippery pavements; one would not look for such a variety of accomplishments in her type. I speculated in what way she might next show her superiority over the majority of the vapid, namby-pamby, doll-like creatures I knew, who set themselves up as typical of American womanhood.

CHAPTER TEN

A BEAST AT BAY

MISS BURGESS applied the brakes with a suddenness that nearly threw me out of my seat; the machine skidded several yards over the wet asphalt under its own momentum before she finally brought it to a standstill.

"There she is now."

My eyes penetrated the gloom until I, too, caught sight of the rain-soaked figure just ahead. She was plodding on through the storm, unheeding the wind that whistled about her ears or the rain that poured down in never ending torrents. Her wet, boyish clothes clung to her well-rounded figure.

We followed along in the machine, keeping at a respectful distance, and I took this opportunity to narrate my experiences in detail to Miss Burgess from the time we had parted at the house in the country until she had rescued me. I told of the attempted robbery at my apartments, my interview with Fitzgerald, and the events of the early evening.

"In spite of all our precautions the package got away from me."

"Don't worry," she assured me, "we still have a chance to regain it. If my suppositions are correct, we are still due for some experiences before the sun rises again."

The storm was abating, and the torrential downpour had given place to a disagreeable drizzle.

Now that I was myself once more, I yearned for action. This sitting back in an automobile, trailing along at a snail's pace after a girl who had bested me twice in a single night, was galling. Had I had my way, I would have pounced upon that lone figure from behind and wrested the documents away from her by sheer brute force.

Steadily the boyish figure of the Italian girl kept on. We had gained an aristocratic quarter of the city, and at last our quarry mounted the steps of an impressive dwelling. We watched until a light gleamed in the hall, and the door opened to admit the girl. Another light flashed from behind shades where darkness had been before, and we knew then in what part of the house the next act of our little drama was to be staged. The light shone from the window of an upstairs apartment, leaving the downstairs in darkness, except for the front hallway. This setting was admirably suited to our present plans. If the interview had taken place downstairs our chances of discovery in trying to force an entrance would have been trebled. Miss Burgess drove to the end of the block, rounded the corner, and we left the machine just as the storm ceased. The clouds had vanished, and tiny stars were peeping at us from a clear sky.

I wondered if this circumstance was prophetic of our

situation, if the events ahead were to clear up the mystery that surrounded us and leave everything as calm and peaceful as before.

Our next task was to find a way to enter the house without being apprehended. First we tried the windows. We had almost completely circled the house before I found one that slid up under the pressure I brought to bear. Cautiously, carefully, I drew myself up and through. Then I gave Miss Burgess a hand. With the agility of a boy she clambered to a place at my side, and we silently closed the window. The extra six-shooter Miss Burgess had so thoughtfully provided nestled close at hand in my coat pocket. I could see the glint of her own weapon as she prepared to locate the stairway leading to the upper floor.

We had the light in the hall to guide our search, so it was only a matter of seconds before we located the stairs. Fearful lest some slight sound might arouse the servants, we exercised the utmost care in ascending the stairs. As we reached the top, the hum of voices fell upon our ears, and a lighted room indicated our goal. We doubled our vigilance, and crept along close to the wall until we brought up just outside the half-opened door from which we distinctly heard the girl we trailed saying:

"But I tell you I will have nothing more to do with this affair."

All the color, all the snap and vitality had gone from her voice. She spoke in a dull, droning monotone.

"Miss Sabastino, at the present time I positively cannot allow you to do as you suggest. You are in possession of too much information. I must insist that you stick by your original agreement. Any deviation would be extremely unwise."

The sound of the man's voice was a decided surprise. I had not had the least suspicion until then that the "boss" who directed her movements was R. F. Fitzgerald. The fact that my room had been raided while he and I were dining together had rather thrown me off the track. I had imagined that perhaps there were two factions struggling for the possession of that mysterious package. Then he must have known all the while we were together that my rooms were being searched. This new turn of affairs added to my bewilderment. What did that package contain that he had gone to such extremes to get it into his hands?

The time was now ripe for action.

Miss Burgess placed her lips close to my ear, and whispered: "You cover the girl; I'll take care of the man myself."

The two were so engrossed in their conversation that they were all unconscious of our presence in the room until Miss Burgess commanded:

"Just raise your hands well above your heads, my friends."

Obediently two pair of arms shot into the air, and at the sight of me the Italian girl acted as if she had seen a ghost.

"Good-evening," I bantered. "You see, I did not have to wait until morning for your assistance, Miss Sabastino."

She cringed. One could see that her iron will was broken, her dominant spirit gone. Her lips quivered, and she struggled to keep back the tears that even now glistened in her eyes. When she spoke her voice faltered, wavered, almost broke.

"You can count on no more trouble from me, Mr. Brent. I have just informed Mr. Fitzgerald that I was about to sever my connections with this affair. Rollo"—she bit her lip in a supreme effort to control herself as she mentioned the dead man's name—"Rollo was mean to me, at times even cruel—but—but—I loved him! And now he is dead!"

Oblivious of the threat of my leveled revolver, she dropped into a chair and buried her head in her arms, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. The rain-water trickling in little rivulets from her saturated garments, the heaving of her bosom as she sobbed her heart out in grief for the man she loved, combined to make her a pitiful picture of abject despair. The effect of her collapse on the other occupants of the room was varied in the extreme.

For my own part my conscience twinged with sudden qualms, for I was the instrument by which her sweetheart had come to his sudden end. Fitzgerald's thick, sensuous lips curled into an ugly sneer, expressive of his disgust for the girl's weakness in yielding thus to her emotions, and Miss Burgess darted one quick, sympathetic glance in her direction, then her features resumed their mask of immobility.

"That rather simplifies matters, Mr. Brent. Suppose you go through this man's pockets, while I keep him covered with this toy. It will be perfectly safe. He knows I wouldn't hesitate in the least to shoot if he made an unnecessary move."

I emptied Fitzgerald's pockets swiftly and efficiently, and found that he was unarmed. I piled the contents of his pockets on the table.

"Now, Mr. Brent, if you will take care of him while I look over these trinkets," suggested Miss Burgess. "Mr. Fitzgerald may be seated if he desires, as long as he doesn't attempt to lower those hands."

I could hear the click of his teeth as he snapped his jaws together in a rage. Again I was reminded of the cat—or was it the leopard?—in his manner, only this time the semblance was that of a cat-beast at bay. He chanced a step forward, but the determination in my eyes, coupled with the unwavering weapon in my hand, checked him. He took Miss Burgess' suggestion and made himself as comfortable as possible in a handy easy-chair. If it had not been such a serious matter, the sight of this pot-bellied, prosperous-looking business man, with his hands thrust grotesquely above his head, would have been funny.

Miss Burgess sorted the articles of which I had deprived him, and selected a letter or two, which went into her hand-bag. I caught her humming snatches of a popular air as she began a systematic search of the room. The place was evidently Fitzgerald's sanctuary. At nearly every turn she found something which went into her spacious bag. She uttered a happy little cry as she discovered a small, red, morocco-bound book, and scanned its contents before depositing it in her bag with the rest of her finds. Fitzgerald had half-turned in his chair at her enthusiastic cry, and at the sight of the book she had unearthed, he swore volubly. I feared for a moment he contemplated launching his huge bulk at the girl, but he thought better of it, and settled back into his chair.

Miss Burgess was still humming when she had completed the search, and her bag bulged with the weight of its contents. There was a phone at one end of the room, and to this she next turned her attention.

"Is this the Department of Justice? This is Douglass' operative No. 2291, Anita Burgess. You'd better send some men up to Fitzgerald's—yes, R. F. Fitzgerald's—I've got enough evidence to convict him a hundred times. There's a girl here, too, who, I think, will be invaluable to us as a witness. Yes, I'll wait for them, but send them right along. My prisoner isn't any too docile, and there's many a slip, you know. All right; good-by."

The receiver clicked into position.

"Douglass' operative No. 2291!" That could mean noth-

ing except the Douglass Detective Agency that had recently been proving of great assistance to the government in hunting out undesirable alien enemies.

"There, that's over. I fear, Mr. Fitzgerald, that you will sleep in a strange bed to-night, but you'll have ample opportunity to get familiar with it. All we can do now, Mr. Brent, is to wait for the men the department is sending."

The package the girl had taken from me was lying, still unopened, on the center table, and my glance rested on it for a moment.

"The documents," I reminded her; "what about those?"

"Oh, those?" Her rippling laughter rang musically upon my ears. "You may open it now, if you like, Mr. Brent. I'll take charge of my prisoner while you do so. It's quite likely he is still interested in the contents, too."

At last I was to learn the secret of the package. It took me what seemed an eternity to break the seal. My fingers were all thumbs. Eventually I held the contents in my hands, and spread the pages out, expectantly.

Imagine my chagrin, my mortification, as I realized that the documents I had so carefully guarded, the important papers that Fitzgerald had been so anxious to obtain, were nothing more nor less than several sheets of folded, blank paper!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE WHOLE TRUTH

FITZGERALD'S face grew purple with rage at the revelation, while I was nonplussed for a brief moment. Then I, too, was filled with a sense of outraged dignity. To think that I had been hoodwinked into safeguarding a package that contained nothing but blank paper! I was bewildered, confounded, disheartened, humiliated and abashed in quick succession.

Miss Burgess was quick to notice my changing expression.

"Don't feel badly over it, Mr. Brent, or feel that you've been made a fool of. The package served its purpose—to aid in bringing this treacherous snake to justice. I know it is all a puzzle to you, that with the facts at your disposal you cannot quite fathom it. But it's a long story. The men from the department are due at any moment. It's nearly morning, and I'm pretty well used up after the nervous strain I've been under for the last few weeks. Suppose we leave the telling for some future time. If I may suggest it, we might dine together to-morrow night at a quiet place I know; then, I promise, I shall tell you the whole interesting truth of the affair."

Her reasoning was sound. I could ask no fairer arrangement. She told me where she wished to dine; we set the time, and the bargain was sealed.

The police came just then, and an astounded butler, awakened by their vigorous ringing, let them in. A still more astounded butler, wide awake now, watched them handcuff his master to them ignominously. The girl promised to go along without this indignity, and Miss Burgess vouched for her safety. I realized that my Lady of the Dragon was a keen analyst of character, for my knowledge of her abilities was growing. In spite of the lateness of the hour, Miss Burgess insisted on driving me to my apartments, where she left me with a parting injunction to remember our dinner appointment for the next evening.

Just as if there was any danger of my forgetting! I looked forward to that explanation with the eagerness a small boy looks forward to a fishing trip with dad. The restaurant she had selected was quiet and unobtrusive, ideally adapted for a meeting of this kind.

I reached the place far in advance of the time set for our appointment, and fretted and fumed at my idiocy in being so infernally early as I paced to and fro in front of the place, awaiting her arrival. My wait would have been needless had I been on time, for Miss Burgess was punctual to the minute.

"Mr. Brent," she began, when we were at last comfortably settled at one of the tables, "first I must apologize for several necessary falsehoods I told you, and for the deception in regard to the contents of the package which caused you so much trouble. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in the garbled version you have of the affair, I had better start at the very beginning, and this is how it all came about:

"My father died just after the war broke out. He had met with serious financial reverses just previous to his death, and left my mother and I practically penniless. I shall always feel that worrying over the impending crash hastened his death. After the estate was settled, I knew, if we used the slight remainder to live upon, it would soon be eaten up, and mother I would be, figuratively speaking, thrown upon the world. I realized that I must find some sort of work at which I could support the two of us. Opportunity beckoned through an influential friend, and I accepted a position with the Douglass Detective Agency. Once well into the work, I reveled in it. I put my wole heart and soul into every task assigned to me, and gradually I came to be used for more hazardous work. Blind luck, more than anything else, aided me in bringing my first few bigger cases to a successful conclusion.

"A short time ago I received instructions to work under the direction of the Department of Justice for the duration of the war. Fitzgerald had been under the surveillance of the department for several months. They suspected his connection with the Central Powers, but needed some positive proof before they dared make an arrest. He was wary. In spite of all their attempts to force his hand, he bided his time. Whatever moves he made were executed in absolute secrecy. Uncle Sam never gives up. Once the government of the United States sets itself against you, you might just as well throw up your hands. The men were unable to procure anything in the way of tangible evidence. Very well, if the men failed, put a woman on the job! I was the woman.

"At the earliest possible moment an introduction between Fitzgerald and me was arranged. I proceeded to cultivate his acquaintance. At the same time rumors were started destined to reach the ears of Fitzgerald. These rumors had it that I was in possession of a formula, left me by my father, for an explosive more powerful, more deadly than T N T—which, as you know, is the most powerful explosive the world has ever known. If Fitzgerald was, as we suspected him, in the pay of the German government, he would be desirous of obtaining this formula before the allies had a chance to open negotiations for it.

"In the hours I spent in the company of this man, I purposely avoided all reference to the subject, but the rumors fostered by the department persisted. Finally he began to be interested. Of course, he was too wise to allow me to know that he was interested. My first clue to his interest was when I came home one evening, after a theater party and midnight supper—with Fitzgerald—to surprise some one in the act of searching my room.

"Douglass put him through the third degree, but he

might just as well have tried getting blood out of a stone. The ruffian denied all knowledge of any such person as R. F. Fitzgerald, or any other party by that name. No way had yet been devised for forcing a man to tell the truth. The only excuse we had for holding him was on a charge of attempted burglary. Acting upon a suggestion from Douglass, the judge gave the culprit a limit sentence.

"In order that Fitzgerald might not suspect I connected him with the episode, I doubled my attentions towards him. It was then that Bassino came into the affair. He was an adventurer, pure and simple. Although an Italian, his love of money was greater than his love of country. You should have been at the department this morning when the girl told how she had been forced to serve his ends against her will. Like many another good woman she had thrown herself away on a worthless scoundrel; and despite the many heartaches and troubles he caused her, she loved him deeply, fiercely. She holds Fitzgerald responsible for her lover's untimely end, and swears vengeance by all the saints. Her willingness to tell what she knows will most likely let her off with a light sentence. But I am straying from the main line.

"Bassino's espionage was worthy of a more deserving cause. Inside a week he had established my connection with the department, and Fitzgerald dropped me as he would a hot coal. I was confronted with the possibility of failure. So far I had proven a match for every task to which I had been assigned, and was resolved that I would not fall down on this problem. I would work out the solution in my own way.

"I cast about for some new method of attack, and analyzed the business of the man, after which I made a list of the people with whom his business brought him into direct contact. In doing so, of course, I included your name. My father had told me the story of the dragon rings, and the oath of fealty connected with them, and had given his ring to me with a request that I respect the vows he had made.

" 'Brent' is not a common name, and the fact that it was the same as the owner of the other ring, commanded my attention. If you were only a descendant of my father's old chum, perhaps I could use the ring to enlist your assistance; that is, if you knew the story of the ring and held sacred the oath your father had taken. It was worth a chance. So I investigated your family history. I went to Manorport, as I told you. I did not do it secretly, however. Far from it. I knew that Bassino, or some one else, was in full knowledge of my every move. That was as I wished. If you became involved in the affair, Fitzgerald would know of it within half an hour. Then I must stake all on the chance of your connection with the matter forcing him to make some unguarded move.

"When I found that you were actually the son of Peter Brent I began my campaign. The element of mystery which surrounded my anonymous note and queer card was to stimulate your interest in the affair. I must have some plausible excuse for asking you to help me, so I fixed up the packet of 'documents' and connected the story I told you. I relied upon your knowledge of the ring and your natural impulsiveness to make you willing to 'go it blind.' You see, I had picked up a great deal of information about you in Manorport that proved of great assistance in formulating my plans. The result of our interview exceeded my wildest expectations.

"I don't know where the 'leak' was in your office, but I do know that Fitzgerald was in possession of every detail of that interview within the hour. I could not have asked for more. You can readily see the importance of keeping that package away from him. Had he discovered that it contained only blank paper, my ruse would have been exposed, my last chance of outwitting him, gone. My other requests for secrecy were simply to impress you more thoroughly, to make you realize the importance of the affair without giving you any real information.

"Practically all the rest of the events you know. That morocco-bound book was a code-book that will help in deciphering several important papers which have fallen into our hands. The other things I took away with me were letters and documents that not only absolutely convict Fitzgerald of being a spy in the pay of the German government, but also implicate parties of national reputation whom we never would have in the least suspected."

So that was the answer to the riddle. It was all simple enough now that the facts were laid before me.

"I trust, Mr. Brent," she was saying, "that just because your connection with this matter is at an end, it will not mean a severance of our relations."

I thrilled at the possibilitties contained in the thought.

"Your sentiments coincide with mine, Miss Burgess, to the letter."

I helped her into her wraps and we made our way leisurely to the street, where I hailed a taxi.

"Now that the ban of secrecy is lifted, may I have the privilege of seeing you to your home—Anita?"

Her blue eyes looked full into mine, searchingly, intently. Her eyelids drooped over them, and she turned partly away as she responded:

"I think you may—Chester."

As we bowled along over the coblestones my mind was a seething caldron of conflicting emotions. Hope and fear, joy and gloom, happiness and despair, played tag with one another around my tired brain.

In an overwhelming flash it came to me. I knew that this girl at my side was the one girl of all girls in the world for me. Fate had crossed the threads of our destinies, and I knew that as surely as there were stars in the heavens that some day I would call her my very own, my Lady of the Dragon.

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THE DRAMATIC AUTHOR

By EUGENE TAYLOR

DURING my third year of service on the Central Office force I was a frequent visitor in the evenings at the Wrekin Tavern, an establishment well known to most New Yorkers. My especial business there was to be on watch for a certain tradesman, whose predilection for convivial, and particularly theatrical society, that led him step by step to distaste for and neglect of his business and finally to ruin. I waited and watched in vain. Stephen Hall did not again show himself at his once favorite place of resort, and ultimately effected his escape to Europe, though the pursuit after him was very hot indeed. As far, therefore, as he was concerned, my time was thrown away, and I should have escaped much disquiet had these visits to the Wrekin been wholly barren in professional experience.

It was not to be so; one of the habitues of the place was a young and quite unmistakable Celt. His face was intellectual rather than handsome, but there was much spirited beauty in his dark eyes and flashing smile. He had, I was told, taken a degree at Trinity College, Dublin, had written with success in the fugitive literature of that capital, and about four months previously to my night acquaintance with him, arrived in New York with the manuscript of a five-act tragedy, acceptance of which by the management of one of the large theaters he was still awaiting with a nervous impatience, strongly dashed with misgiving, notwithstanding that all those amongst his associates to whom he had read the play were unanimously of opinion that it was a work of wondrous genius. Tom Collins was a prime favorite with the frequenters of the Wrekin; quick in repartee, and an overflowing amount of genial, if not very exquisite humor. He sang well, too; and one particular song, said to be his own composition, both in words and music, he sang twice during the same evening. It did not much impress me with an idea of his skill as a writer of ballads, it being a mere echo of the sensuous sweetness of Chong. His dramatic genius might, however, be of a higher order than his song power, and, if so, I sincerely hoped that his success would not be long delayed. It was a sad sight to see a man of great promise so wasting and soiling his golden prime. The Helicon, the synopsis of which I had read inspired or stimulated the poetic soul, was not, I felt quite sure, born of whisky and water.

There were other circumstances which quickened the sort of languid interest which, from the first, I felt in the gifted young Irishman. He was well-dressed, and appeared to be tolerably well supplied with mony. His board, I suspected, cost very little; his drink expenses, including frequent treats to others, could not certainly exceed two dollars a day—an expense which a small legacy he had sufficed to meet. But there was an elderly, gray-haired man, almost constantly sitting by his side at the Wrekin, whose threadbare clothes and niggardly expenditure contrasted strangely with the fashionable apparel and lavish outlay of the young man, for whom he evidently felt the tenderest regard and highest admiration. I noticed that Dobbs, as he was called (he was, I heard, a back-number actor, who had been the original Dobbs in some play or farce)—I noticed, I say, that Dobbs would sit for hours over one glass of 2.75 beer and almost constantly refused to be treated by the thoughtless author. When the hour arrived for the departure of the company, he made use of every means of persuasion in his power—tears in his fading eyes, the name of Aileen trembling from his thin, shriveled lips—to induce him to go home. I felt a great respect for the original Dobbs. He might be a bum actor, but he certainly was a true gentleman in spite of his seedy clothes, his utter poverty, and the contaminating associations with which that poverty had forced him.

I wished, in a half-careless way, to know something more of him and his connection with Collins, and with that view I questioned one Roberts, a frequenter of the Wrekin. I was informed Dobbs was an actor of unquestionable talent, against whom an unaccountable prejudice prevailed among the metropolitan managers. He had never been able to obtain a New York engagement. Now, I had closely observed this Roberts, in consequence of a vague notion that I had somewhere seen him under discreditable circumstances. Being able, after much trying, to remember when or where and he evidently having no recollection of me, I concluded that a real or fancied resemblance to another person had misled me.

"Is Dobbs, as you call him, related to Collins?" I asked, amidst the clink and clatter attending the replenishment of glasses, at the conclusion of an uproariously applauded song.

"Not yet," replied Roberts, in a tone as guarded as my own. "Not yet; but if Collins' play is accepted and proves successful—and I hope my head will never ache till then—they will no doubt be father and son-in-law."

"Dobbs has a daughter, then, whom Collins is courting?"

"Yes; and a very nice girl indeed is Aileen McGrath, but possessed of no more talent for the stage than her stick of a father. As to the play itself, which is to make all their fortunes," continued Roberts, "it will never be accepted by any manager who has not lost his senses. The fellows here who praise it to the skies, and who will drain the conceited Irishman of his last dollar, know it as well as I do. Collins is as devoid of true dramatic genius," added Roberts, touching the empty glass before him with the end of his pipe, "as this glass is of booze."

I understood the hint quite well, but, as I had paid for the last round, I did not see the expediency of acting upon it. The disappointment was a transient one.

"Roberts," said Collins, who was passing us, "Roberts, you will take a glass—two if you will—with me this evening?"

"Ace of trumps, I will!" exclaimed Roberts, jumping up and grasping Collins' hand with a natural assumption of friendship and esteem decisive of his talent as an actor. "Ace of hearts, as well as trumps, I should have said."

"Let me tell you," interrupted Collins, "why I am in such capital spirits to-night. I met Harley this afternoon, and he assured me that my play has been read in the green room to the chiefs of the company by Brady, and that a most favorable opinion has been expressed

some even predicting that its success will equal that of Knowle's *Virginius*."

"Why, of course it will!" was Roberts' prompt rejoinder; "men are not sticks and stones; they have powers of appreciation; and knowing, as we all do, that Knowle's play was made by Macready's acting—that acting itself mere melodramatic strutting and spouting, by the way—the superior success of yours is not to be doubted. Waiter," added Mr. Roberts, as that functionary came up, and Collins passed to his place, "Scotch whisky for me."

The order given, Mr. Roberts relit his pipe, favored me with an expressive wink, and resumed his former strain of malignity, which I interrupted by a curt "Good-night."

During the next two months I looked in at the Wrekin two or three times a week, if I happened to be passing near; I almost invariably found Collins there, and knew without inquiring that the fate of his play was still undecided. His clothes were getting seedy, his watch and diamond breast-pin had disappeared, and his bright young life seemed to be passing under the shadow of a great eclipse. The fire of his wit and humor flashed faintly at intervals only, and it was painfully manifest that the mental and moral wreck of a fine mind could only be averted by the speedy realization of the dream of success and fame by which he had been lured from the safe, beaten path of life. The original Dobbs, I observed, was still hopeful, or affected to be so; but his cheerful commonplaces fell upon ears deafer with each passing day to such windy consolation. Several times I was about to counsel the misguided young man to break away at all hazard from the thralldom of a dreaming idleness, and to get work of some sort—literary work, if none other were within his reach—but the half-formed words remained unspoken. What right had I to obtrude advice upon a person with whom I had never exchanged a word? It would have been sheer impertinence to do so.

It was in the stars, nevertheless, that Collins and I should be brought into close communication with each other. It came to pass thus wise:

The day when acceptance or rejection of the play by the Brady management was to be definitely announced, had arrived, and Collins awaited at the Wrekin with fierce restlessness the coming of the managerial missive which would decide his fate.

The afternoon had passed away, and evening was wearing late; still it came not, though Roberts, who had volunteered to go and question the stage manager as to the reason of the delay, had been gone more than an hour. At last Dobbs, unable to bear the cruel suspence any longer, jumped up and left the room, declaring that he would see Mr. Brady himself, and be back in no time.

He had been gone about ten minutes only when Roberts bounced into the room. Instantly there was a dead silence, and Collins, trembling in every limb, staggered, as it were, to his feet, and with ashen lips quivered out, "Well?"

"It is not well, I am sorry to say," replied Roberts, with a miserable affectation of sympathy. "Mr. Harley is grieved to say that the play has been rejected, and adds that the MS. will be returned this evening, or early to-morrow."

Poor Collins fell down in his seat as if shot, looked around with a wild, ghastly stare, and burst into a fit of laughter. One of the company sitting near proffered him a full glass of whisky, which he emptied at a gulp. It appeared to still his agitation; and looking around, as if his purpose needed excuse, he muttered some half-incoherent words to the effect "that after such news he must take a breath of fresh air to revive himself;" and as his fevered eyes met mine, in passing me (he knew my vocation), he added, "that he should be back in five minutes, or less."

A vague apprehension of the purpose for which he was hurrying away crossed my mind, and, after a lapse of two or three minutes I started up to go in quest of the unfortunate youth.

As I opened the door to go out, I was almost knocked off my legs by the sudden inrush of Dobbs in a state of tremendous excitement, and waving a paper triumphantly aloft.

"Hurrah!" he screamed; "hurrah! The play will be put in rehearsal immediately. Where's Collins?"

Half a dozen voices replied that he would be back immediately; and it was then angrily demanded of Roberts why he had just before announced, upon the authority of Mr. Harley, that the play was rejected.

"I did not say of my own knowledge that Mr. Harley had so expressed himself," sullenly rejoined Roberts. "Franks was my informant. I spoke after him."

"Then Franks is a liar!" cried Dobbs. "Here is the genuine article in black and white!" again triumphantly waving aloft the paper in his hand. He next read it with asthmatic stops, adding: "Here it is in black and white, written by Mr. Brady himself, and given to me unsealed:

"'Mr. Brady presents his compliments to Mr. Collins, and is happy to inform him that his play has been definitely accepted by the management, and will be immediately put in rehearsal. If Mr. Collins can make it convenient to call to-morrow at the theater, between twelve and two, Mr. Brady will confer with him upon the business arrangements consequent upon the acceptance of the play.'

"That's conclusive, I rather think—a little about the edges," continued Dobbs. "But why does not Collins return? Surely he cannot be gone home already!"

"No, no, no," was the chorus answer, and Dobbs went on to relate in detail his interview with Mr. Brady. I stayed not to hear him, the apprehension which the peculiar expression of Collins' face as he passed out of the room had excited, coming back upon me, as minute after minute passed away.

I vainly sought for him about the purlieus of the tavern, and, as I had made myself acquainted with the whereabouts of his home, I stepped briskly in that direction, my sharp walk presently accelerated to a run. West 12th street was no great distance, and I soon ascertained he had not been there since he left in the morning. I hurried back as swiftly to see if he had returned to the Wrekin. A few yards from the roadhouse I met a police officer, and asked him if he had seen a tall young man, wearing a short coat and an automobile cap. Yes, he had, about five minutes before, leaning against a lamp-post. The officer thought he was tipsy, accosted him, and was rudely repulsed, and the man went on his way with a feeble, staggering pace, but not so much so as to justify police interference. "He was going towards the Viaduct Bridge," added the officer, calling after me. I had concluded so; the mode of accomplishing the mischief which is so swift to enter into the thoughts of desperate men having instinctively, as it were, suggested itself to my mind.

The night was bleak and gusty; there were very few persons abroad; the clouded moon afforded barely sufficient light, to dimly distinguish objects in the distance; and it was not till I had crossed Broadway that I fancied I saw Mr. Collins. A tall man was standing on the curb, within a dozen paces of the end of the bridge. Presently a taxi came rapidly along, the brilliant lamps of which shone for a moment full upon the man's face, and I knew

I was not mistaken. Collins was standing still; his suicidal intent, as I judged, checked by the tremendous "perhaps," which makes calamity of such long life. I feared to resolve that hesitation in a fatal sense by showing myself till I was within grappling distance. A false pride would, I dreaded, prompt him to consummate the dreadful purpose of which he would instantly be aware he was suspected.

I therefore crept cautiously along, keeping myself as much as possible in shadow, and had got within perhaps twenty paces of him when he suddenly started off at a run. I followed hard, but he heard not, or, at least, appeared not to hear my pursuing steps, and I soon neared him sufficiently to be able to frustrate the design of which I suspected him, should he attempt to put it in execution.

He did attempt to do so, near the middle of the bridge, and in another half minute would have been over the parapet. I caught him first by the coat, which came away in my hand. The pull, fortunately, checked his spring, and the next moment I seized him firmly around the body and drew him by main force off the parapet on to the bridge.

"D——n! who are you? How dare you interfere with me?" he exclaimed. "Loose your hold, or by the living God——"

"Do not, Mr. Collins, take the name of the living God in vain at such a moment. It is useless to struggle. If you persist in doing so I must summon assistance, though I wish to spare you the exposure which——"

"Ha! I know you now," he interrupted. "You are the detective who has frequented the Wrekin for some months past. You are a devilish clever, lynx-eyed chap, they say, and know, perhaps, as well as I do, that I am not only trodden down into the mire of poverty, but am trembling on the very verge of infamy."

"I know nothing, suspect nothing of the kind, Collins. A young man with good health and fine talents is very silly, it seems to me, to attempt killing himself for nothing of more moment than a passing literary disappointment! Besides," I added, "that fellow Roberts is one whose assertion I would not value at a button's worth. I do not believe he has seen Mr. Harley, or that your play has been rejected."

"What is that?" exclaimed Collins, stopping short, and peering eagerly in my face. We were by then slowly returning towards the city. "What is that?"

"Before I say another word, Mr. Collins, you must give me your word, as a gentleman, that you will never again, under any circumstances, attempt suicide. If you refuse to do so you will have to appear in the morning before a magistrate."

"Yes, yes. I promise upon the word of a gentleman (with bitter emphasis upon 'gentleman'). And now, what meant you about Roberts? Your tone and look intimated more, much more than your words. Speak," he added in a quick, trembling voice. "Do not keep me in suspense, nor mock me!"

I at once ran over what had occurred at the Wrekin after he left, and repeated pretty nearly the very words of Mr. Brady's note.

He listened with suspended breath; and when my voice ceased, and he felt that what I had said was the truth, his high-strung nerves gave way, and he leaned for support upon the balustrade, sobbing like a child.

Now the circumstances did not, to my prosaic mind, warrant such extreme emotion; and the sentence, "Trembling on the very verge of infamy," which, when uttered by him, had jarred unpleasantly on my ear, recurred painfully. No doubt the young man was in debt, but even should his play prove unremunerative, which I knew enough of such matters to be aware was quite possible, unliquidated liabilities did not usually involve infamy.

Collins presently grew calmer and we walked on. I took the liberty of advising him not to return to the Wrekin that night. I would myself look in and bring out Dobbs. He took my counsel, and after I had given him my private address, he and the original Dobbs, now much mystified by my budding intimacy with his son-in-law-elect, took their joyous way homeward.

Shortly afterwards the play was advertised in the newspapers and playhouse placards, and was, as well as I could judge, strongly cast.

A few days before the decisive night I received twelve free tickets for the theater, with Mr. and Mrs. Collins' compliments. Collins had then married Aileen McGrath, upon the strength of his yet problematical success as a playwright! A rash venture it seemed, and yet, if the marriage rescued him from his Wrekin associates, it might turn out to be the most prudent step he could have taken.

As, if I myself should be able to witness the performance, three tickets were all we could make use of, I called at 125th street to return the remainder, which might be more advantageously disposed of. I was then introduced to Mrs. Collins, a most amiable young woman, with about as lovable a face and figure as one could wish to meet with. Her eyes were of the gray-blue color, peculiar, as far as my observation has gone, to Irishwomen, and her nose, slightly *retrousse*, added wonderfully to the arch expression of her bright face. No cunning, sinister event cast the faintest shadow upon her clear young brow, and I sincerely hoped, though with much misgiving, that the moral sunshine which illumined her new home would be perennial.

Collins, who was going to the theater, left with me. Once out of the sight and hearing of his wife, the buoyant gayety he had assumed in her presence suddenly subsided into a stern, gloomy sadness. In reply to my look, questioning the reason of such a change, he muttered something about the precariousness of his position; adding, in a tone of petulant discontent:

"The truth is, I begin to think I have made a fool of myself, which by the bye, I have a knack of doing, with respect to money arrangements. The Shubert management offered me a thousand dollars down for my play, or two thousand if it should run four consecutive weeks, and I—I accepted and signed the latter proposal."

"And rightly so, I should think."

"Well, yes, under ordinary circumstances; but the truth is that I must have five hundred dollars within a fortnight of to-morrow. Should I fail in obtaining it, I shall curse you with my last breath for your interference on the bridge. You need not," he added, forcing a faint laugh, "you need not fix that 'detective' look so sternly upon my face. My position is exactly this: a fortnight ago I took up an acceptance for $250, which I had discounted by an acceptance by the same loan shark for five hundred dollars, without which I could not have married Aileen. The discounters know the circumstances very well. You understand, therefore, that the bill must be paid at maturity."

"That is all you fear?"

"What the devil else do you suppose I fear?" he exclaimed, taking care, however, that I should not see his face. "That is fear enough, I think. It struck me," he added, more quietly, "that you might know some party who would advance me, in case of necessity, five hundred dollars, upon my legal assignment of my hypothetical claim upon the theatrical management for $2,000.

"I am not acquainted with any such party. The ac-

ceptor of the five hundred dollar note," I added, "would, of course, be glad to enter into the arrangement."

"The old skinflint would not do it," burst out poor Collins, with incautious vehemence, "to save his nephew from the gallows."

"His nephew?"

"Didn't I tell you my uncle was the acceptor? But here we are at the stage entrance to the theater. Good-morning."

I understood better now the purport of the phrase "Trembling upon the verge of infamy." Still, it was but a suspicion, after all, from which I drew such frightful conclusions—a suspicion, moreover, which I had no inclination to test the soundness of.

The theater was full, though not crowded, on the decisive night, and the play, which I thought manifested considerable poetic power, of a didactic kind, but of which the dramatic interest, such as it was, could neither have hurried the pulse nor suffused the eyes of the most susceptible of the auditors, was well enough received, and given out for repetition amidst general but languid applause. It was, I felt, a great pity that Collins had not taken the $1,000. His play, I more than feared, would never run the four consecutive weeks.

It was withdrawn after the sixth representation, and about noon on the day I saw that announcement placard, I looked in at the Wrekin, with the anxious purpose of hearing tidings of the practically unsuccessful dramatic author. To my great surprise Collins was there, in the highest spirits. Leaving his chums, he beckoned me apart, and informed me that his play was temporarily withdrawn, to be shortened, by himself of course, and otherwise rendered more telling as an acting play. "And," added Collins, "the management have this very morning paid me one thousand dollars down for the copyright."

"You have lost no time, then, I suppose, in taking up your uncle's note?"

"I have sought to do so," he replied, flushing scarlet. "It will be due the day after to-morrow, and will, no doubt, turn up in due course. It is payable at my own place, and I shall, therefore, have no trouble about it. Will you," he added, "stay and take a glass or two of wine with a few friends I expect here presently?"

I abruptly declined the invitation, and left the house. The rest of the day was spent in the performance of duties which kept me in the immediate neighborhood, and my way home lying past the Wrekin, I dropped in to speak and reason with Collins, who, I remembered, with much uneasiness, if but for his young wife's sake, had probably the one thousand dollars in his pocket.

There was not one person in the general room, and ordering a glass of beer, I took occasion to ask the waiter what had become of the usual company, and especially of Mr. Collins.

"He went away two or three hours ago with a whole lot of them," was the reply. "They are gone to a billiard-room hereabouts, where Mr. Collins and Roberts are to play a dozen games of sixty up for twenty-five dollars a game."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, greatly startled. "Why, Collins must be downright mad!"

"That's about it," replied the man; "though it ain't for me, of course, to holler about what the gents do with their money. Roberts," he added confidentially, "though he swore he knew nothing scarcely about the game—hadn't played it, in fact, for ever so many years—will polish Mr. Collins off in style, depend upon it, though Mr. Collins is, I hear, a fine player. Between ourselves," continued the waiter, with deepening confidence, "Mr. Roberts is a gent that don't mind acting as a billiard-marker at a Harlem establishment when he's out of luck and an engagement; and that, I've a notion, is one reason why the respectable theatrical gents fight shy of him. He has got, however," added the loquacious servitor, "a good engagement at the Criterion Theater; fifty dollars a week, I'm told—no less; and starts to-morrow or next day. It's a pity for poor Collins' sake—who is a real gentleman, and no mistake—that he didn't start yesterday."

"Had Collins, who you say is a fine player, taken much wine when he left to play the match with Roberts?"

"He had, sir."

"Do you know where the billiard establishment, at which Mr. Roberts has sometimes assisted as marker, is situated?"

"I do not. It's pretty much hearsay I've been a-letting on, you must understand; and in course," the man added, with his finger on his lip, "mum's the word between us two, whether it's all gospel or not."

I nodded assent, and exit waiter.

I was cudgeling my brains once more as to where I had seen Roberts, the waiter's hint as to his occasional vocation as billiard-marker having narrowed the range of police-vision over which my memory glanced, and the man's face was dimly surging into recollection, when a tumult of voices was heard from without, quickly succeeded by the inrush of seven or eight men all speaking together; the loudest and fiercest being Collins, whom the others were striving to soothe into resigned acquiescence in the loss of $250, which Roberts had got from him by billiard sharping. Collins was mad with rage—drunk with wine and passion—rage against himself, not against the winner of his money, he evidently having no suspicion that he had been the victim of unfair play—unfair in this particular, that your opponent knowing himself to be a superior player, against whom you positively have not the ghost of a chance, pretends that he knows little or nothing about the game. The only word-sedative to which Collins was not wholly insensible was a promise, many times iterated, that Roberts would give him his "revenge" the next day.

I listened in sad silence, knowing as I did that I was witnessing a fearful tragedy, upon the last act of which the curtain was about to rise. Collins drank furiously—tossed liquor down his throat as if he therewith hoped to quench the fiery arrows of remorse—to sweep from his brain the images of ruin, shame, despair, which I could not doubt were trooping through it with ceaseless continuity.

At last I interposed. Rising abruptly, I approached Collins, touched him on the arm, and said I wished to see him home at once. He had not observed me before, and my sudden appearance greatly startled him. I comprehended the mortal fear which, in his half-frenzied state, whitened his flushed face and shook his frame, and I hastened to say: "It's getting late, Mr. Collins; you are not yourself, and I will see you home."

He complied, with the helpless submissiveness of a child, and, taking his arm within mine to steady him, we left the place. Neither of us spoke, I think, till we were at the door of the 125th street house.

"You will say nothing to my wife?" he whispered.

"Nothing that is not absolutely necessary. I shall tell her that you have $250 about you, which she must take possession of, and that I shall be here early to-morrow."

The door opened before Collins could make any reply; he was got to bed, and I had a conference with Mrs. Collins and her father. A very painful conference. I did not want to talk about the note—to know anything concerning it, except as to the means of meeting it on the next day but one. "There are no means," sobbed the pale,

nervous wife; "none—no resource—no hope! Oh, my husband!" saying which, she fainted in her father's arms; and he, too, was crying like a child.

The next morning I was told that Collins was delirious, and that a serious attack of brain-fever was apprehended. I learned, also, that had he avoided the snare set for him by Roberts, prosperous and happy days were, in all likelihood, in store for him; a note having been received from the manager of a great morning paper, offering Collins a reportership at a weekly salary of $50, Collins' stenographic skill being, I had before heard, remarkable.

What was to be done? What could I do to compel that rascal Roberts to refund it before twenty-four hours had passed away. That was the question of questions.

Ransacking my memory anent Roberts had at last suggested that I had seen him at a police station as a prisoner in a gambling case, of which Kearns, a very active officer, had the management. I could remember nothing of the result of the investigation; but there could certainly be no harm, and might do much good, in advising with Kearns as to the present very pressing matter.

I did so; and at about half-past eleven in the forenoon Kearns and I entered the public room of the Wrekin, where we found Mr. Roberts. The successful swindle of the previous day, and his engagement at the theater, had puffed him up amazingly, and he was unusually mouthy, boastful and ostentatiously generous. He was gracious enough to present me with a glass of wine. I declined the favor, and he then offered it to my companion. Clever actor as he might be, he never made a more natural start of surprise and consternation than when he recognized Kearns.

"Mr. Calvert, I believe," said Kearns, not too loud, "a gentleman whom I once had the honor to——"

"Hush! hush!" interrupted Roberts. "Step this way," he added, after a flurried glance at the company. "I have a word to say to you in private."

He led the way to an adjoining room, whither, after conferring together, we followed. Roberts had already ordered in wine, which he pressed us to partake of.

"I shall take nothing at your expense, nor with you," said Kearns; "you have been at your old swindling tricks again, I hear."

"What right have you to address me in that style?" retorted Roberts, endeavoring to put on a frontlet of defiance.

"Your style won't do for me," rejoined Kearns, "so you had better not try it on. The state of the case is this," continued Kearns, "and no two ways about it. A certain person, Calvert, alias Roberts, by name, was detected in swindling a rich young greenhorn, by billiard-sharping; also of having palmed off upon a drunken hick a bank note of the Bank of Elegance for a genuine one hundred dollar note. Well, neither of the two cheated gents would appear against Calvert, alias Roberts; that respestable individual having sworn to leave off his swindling and live honestly for the future. Well, now, here it is: I know where to drop upon one of them bamboozled gents in less than half an hour, my friend keeping you company the while; and wher. I inform said bamboozled gent that you have robbed a poor fellow of $250 by the old dodge, it strikes me you'll be likely to make your appearance in Mulberry street instead of the theater."

This bluff on the part of my friend Kearns was very well done; but judging from the dogged expression which, as he was speaking, overgrew Roberts' face, I, more than doubting its success, struck in before he could reply:

"One effect of which appearance at headquarters, in your real name of Roberts, would be to certainly put an end to your engagement, even supposing that the evidence should in a legal sense break down; which could, however, hardly be, fortified as it would be by yesterday's billiard-sharping."

This was too plain to be disputed, and Roberts' countenance fell woefully.

"In neither of the cases mentioned," he presently said, "did I commit any fraud; and I cannot believe that in this country the criminal law can be put in motion to force a man to refund his fair winnings."

"We have nothing to do, Mr. Roberts, with your refunding of fair or unfair winnings. You will act in that respect as you think fit. Meanwhile my friend Kearns will go and seek the party who declined to prosecute on a former occasion, and whilst he is gone, though I may not take Calvert, alias Roberts, into custody, I shall certainly not lose sight of him. Be as quick as you can, Kearns," I added. The officer said he would be back in no time, and hurried off.

"This insolent humbug does not fool me," said Roberts; "not a bit of it, and were it not for the public scandal, and the probable loss, in consequence, of the theatrical engagement, I would see you both in flames before I would part with a cent of my lawful winnings."

"I have nothing, I again say, to do with your lawful or unlawful winnings; but as certainly as that you are a practiced blackleg, I shall immediately advise Mr. Collins to apply for a summons against you; and I have no doubt that he will act upon that advice."

"Damn you and your advice!" exclaimed Roberts, with choking rage. "I am in a cursed fix, and yet——"

"I shall go and speak to Mr. Collins at once," said I, rising to go. "Prompt action in all such cases is advisable, and we shall always be able to find Mr. Roberts, otherwise Calvert, in New York or elsewhere."

I then left, and walked towards Third avenue, still very dubious as to the result. Mr. Collins, his wife told me, was much calmer, and I had barely time to caution her not to speak of his illness, or to accept less than the $250, when there was a violent ring at the first-floor door bell, and peeping through the blind, the original Dobbs announced that Roberts was at the door.

"Mrs. Collins," said that worthy, still in a flaming rage, "that insolent puppy of a cop is with your husband, trying to persuade him to trump up a charge of cheating against me, knowing well that such a charge would just now utterly blast my prospects. I therefore return the $250 which I fairly won of your husband; under solemn protest, mind you. Here are the identical bank-notes, and the devil give you joy of them!"

The note was duly paid upon presentation next day. At least, I judged so from the renewed brightness of Mrs. Collins' countenance when I called in the evening. An hour or thereabouts previously I had the honor of touching my hat to Mr. Roberts in response to that gentleman's clinched fist, shaken savagely at me from the seat of a passing taxi.

Mr. and Mrs. Collins emigrated with their young family out West some six or seven days after the occurrences I have roughly penned; with much advantage, I have reason to believe, to their fortunes. The original Dobbs went with them.

If you like the contents of this magazine you would confer an obligation upon the publisher by telling all your friends about it. We publish the best detective stories, and stories of mystery that money can buy. They are written by the most famous authors in the business.

THE FATAL LETTER

By ALFRED BERRY

"YOUR last evening in Russia," said Ivan Zosemoff, my brother-in-law, as we strolled along the side of the quay at Dolganief in the cool of the evening. "Won't you be glad to get back to little old New York?"

I shook my head very energetically in reply. Ivan shrugged his shoulders with an air of comic despair.

"Another opportunity lost of practicing your Russ," he said; "and your five weeks are over to-morrow. What is the good of my bringing you out here, to perfect yourself in the language, if every time you converse with me you insist on using English slang or no language at all? You can shake your head as much as you like when you get back to America, but you are simply throwing away your opportunities in Dolganief."

I summoned up my most elaborate Russ—I could speak it pretty well, thanks to Ivan's tuition—and replied that, though I was devoted to my country, still I should be content to dispense with its charms for a little while longer for the pleasure of being with Ivan among the fresh and interesting scenes of Russia. My sister was called to nurse our only living relative, Aunt Catharine, just as she was starting with Ivan. Of course I altogether regretted my dear aunt's illness, still, I looked upon her indisposition as a not altogether unmixed evil, since it had led Ivan to take me instead of Eleanor with him on his business visit to the land of his birth.

I am afraid Ivan was bored before I got half way through my speech; but that made it all the more fun pouring out my elaborate Russ to him.

"Wel, I must say you are unpatriotic," he observed, when it was over; you, an American——"

"Don't happen to have a wife in London, and am, therefore, less eager to get back," I interrupted, remembering this time to speak in Russ. "Beside I am horribly disappointed. I hardly think I dare go back and tell the fellows I have been five weeks in Russia and have not seen a sledge, or a wolf or a Nihilist. They expected me, I believe, to join a secret society and try to blow up the Czar, just to tell them what it was like."

"Hush!" whispered Ivan, looking round half anxiously to see if any one had overhead. "You had better stick to English, if you are going to talk like that. We have to be careful what we say here, you know."

"But I did really expect to have the police make a domiciliary visit and ransack my love letters for treasonable correspondence, as they do in every novel about Russia. For all I've seen of plots and police tyranny, I might just as well have been in New York."

"For which fact you should be devoutly thankful," said Ivan, quite solemnly.

"If Peter Petrovitch wasn't telling me lies," I went on, "I missed a good chance this afternoon. He says there was quite a little riot down by the Haymarket; the police pounced upon a meeting of the 'Red Fingers,' and fired upon them when they resisted. Didn't you hear about it? Two of the Nihilist fellows were shot, but their companions got them clear away; and Peter Petrovitch says they are hidden in the town somewhere and haven't been found yet. I wish I had been there."

"What—to get shot?"

"Well, it would have been something to show my friends if I had been wounded slightly in a Nihilist row."

Ivan had been glancing around rather uneasily all the while I was speaking. He stopped me now with a low "Hush!"—and, looking behind me, I saw a man apparently following us, his face muffled up closely and his hat down over his eyes. We were just leaving the quay by a dark little street which ran almost directly through to the place of St. Catharine, where our hotel was.

"Let us stop a moment," whispered Ivan, when we had gone a little way, "and see if he will pass us." He pulled out his cigarette case, and in the excitement actually offered me one, which I promptly accepted; and I stood still to strike a match on the dark wall.

The stranger did not pass us, as I thought he was about to do by the way in which he came up. Instead, he turned, and, taking off his hat with great politeness, addressed my brother-in-law:

"Ivan Zosemoff, I believe?"

"That is so," said Ivan shortly, letting the match in its fingers burn itself out—as it flared up, I saw that Ivan was suddenly looking quite pale.

"Perhaps you will come back and take a turn with me on the quay," said the stranger in the same tone of studied politeness. "I am Nicholas Petrowsky, and have a message from my brother——"

"Peter Petrowsky!" exclaimed Ivan; and, as I struck another match to try and see Petrowsky's face, I noticed that Ivan's was more disturbed than ever. "He quarreled with me last night," he said.

"Yes—I think that is why he wishes to see you. He is dying."

My brother-in-law started.

"Will you come and see him?" asked Petrowsky. He had not taken any notice of me; and Ivan seemed to forget my existence as they talked.

"Certainly," he replied. "I was very sorry that we quarreled. I did not wish to do so. I should certainly like a reconciliation if he is as ill as you say. Surely he was quite well yesterday? Has he had an accident?"

"I can explain that better afterward, if you will come," said Petrowsky.

"I will go at once," Ivan answered.

The stranger laid a hand upon his arm.

"One moment first, please, Mr. Zosemoff. You are, I believe, a man of honor, and would not betray the confidence even of one with whose efforts you are no longer in sympathy."

He seemed to lay a significant stress upon the words "no longer," and I saw Ivan shiver slightly. He only nodded his head in reply.

Petrowsky paused and looked at me.

"You have not introduced me to your friend," he said.

"Oh, my brother-in-law," replied Ivan shortly; and, as the stranger bowed with extreme politeness, I did my best to imitate him.

After the introduction there was a minute's silence, and then Ivan turned and said to me in English:

"Perhaps you had better go, Charlie. I will join you at the hotel some time to-night."

"And lose the chance of an adventure now it has come?" I answered. "Well, I call it a thundering shame!"

My brother-in-law smiled faintly.

"I wish you could have had the adventure alone. Listen! Six years ago, when I was young and impetuous, I joined the Society of the Red Finger here at Dolganief. A week later, when I found in its midst more thirst for murder and revenge than for the welfare of the people, I was anxious to leave it. Fortunately I was allowed to retire, thanks mainly to the influence of this Peter Petrowsky who wishes to see me. I dare not neglect the summons. But you——"

"Will stick to you, old man, like a leech!"

"You had better let our friends think you speak only English, then," said Ivan; and he turned to Petrowsky and explained to him in Russ that I was American and that I wished to accompany him.

"Ah, the Yankees are always friends of freedom!" said Petrowsky, with a bow of greater politeness than before; and I almost forgot to wait for Ivan to translate the remark before bowing in return and saying I hoped so.

As we left the quayside again to turn down the dark, narrow thoroughfare where Petrowsky first accosted us, he proposed that we should walk slowly along smoking, so as not to attract attention.

"After the unfortunate affair of this afternoon," he said, "the police are very much on the alert. This request of my brother's will be a source of considerable danger to all his friends."

Ivan tried to murmur some apology.

"But who can refuse the request of a dying man?" Petrowsky went on. "You were an old friend of my brother's, I believe, Mr. Zosemoff?"

"I am much indebted to him," said Ivan.

"And yet it seems to me that he was anxious to ask your forgiveness for something. I hope we shall reach him before it is too late."

We had turned out of the narrow thoroughfare, and, after passing through a few crowded streets of the lower class, we were crossing the deserted Haymarket. It struck me then for the first time that the man we were about to see must be one of those about whom Peter Petrovitch, the hotel waiter, had told me—the "Red Fingers"—who had been wounded by the police and hidden away by friends.

"Before we go any farther," said Petrowsky, when we had crossed the deserted square and turned into another dark, lonely street of dilapidated buildings, "I must extract a promise from you."

"You may be sure I shall not utilize any information I may acquire to injure you or your friends," said Ivan; "and to-morrow I sail for America."

"Personally," replied the Russian, "I am inclined to trust to your word; but my friends have compelled me to impose a condition which will place it out of your power to harm any of us except the two who are dying and myself, who will stay with them. We three may still be at your mercy, unless death intervenes."

"And your condition?" inquired Ivan impatiently.

"My friends' condition is that you agree, before accompanying me to my brother's side, to remain there for twelve hours."

"It is nearly nine o'clock," Ivan said. "My ship is to sail at eleven to-morrow. It is cutting it rather fine."

"Unfortunately I am not allowed to alter the terms. It is hard to deny a dying man's request; but of course, if you cannot accept the arrangement of my friends, we must part here."

"And Peter Petrowsky wants to ask me to forgive something," said Ivan, almost to himself.

"And is more anxious than I can describe to see you," added Petrowsky. "Well, your decision, Mr. Zosemoff?"

"You in return will pledge me your word that in twelve hours I shall be allowed to depart without further restriction?"

"Certainly."

"Then I pledge you my word as a gentleman to remain," said Ivan.

A few moments later we had turned up an almost pitch dark alley; and Petrowsky, whispering to us to follow him, unlocked a door which we could not see in the obscurity. Then, after closing it behind him he commenced to grope his way before us up a broken and uneven staircase. He did not pause until we were on the third landing, where we could see a faint light shining beneath the door of one of the rooms. Petrowsky gave a peculiar whistle, and the door was thrown open, showing a large room, which might have been used for a workshop or warehouse, and which at first sight as one peered into it from the darkness, appeared to be full of people.

There were only five there I noticed, as I stood within and looked around—three sitting beside a low smoldering fire which, with two flaring candles lighted the room, and two lying on some straw which was scattered over the floor.

The men by the fire stared at us as we entered. One with a big black beard spoke to Nicholas Petrowsky, our guide.

"He has promised?" he asked.

Petrowsky nodded.

"And the youngster?"

"Is a Yankee, and does not count."

How I wished I had not dropped my cigarette at the bottom of the stairs—for I think my manner of smoking cigarettes particularly manly.

As Petrowsky spoke he was bending over one of the figures on the floor.

"He is alive and knows you have come," he said, looking up and speaking to Ivan who still stood in the doorway. Then my brother-in-law went over and knelt down in the straw by the sick man's side; but I hardly noticed their greeting, for I was fascinated.

The other man who was reclining beside Peter Petrowsky appeared, like him, to be wounded, and as I entered the room he fixed his eyes upon me, and I could not keep mine from his face. It was deathly pale and bore traces of a recent encounter, and a linen bandage was bound round his temples. He lay in the straw with his head raised a little, his lips moving as though he were speaking to himself. His terrible eyes fascinated me, holding me spell-bound.

I wished to listen to what Peter Petrowsky had to say to my brother-in-law, but I could not tear myself away from that terrible face. I do not know how long I had been standing gazing at it—at the eyes that were glaring straight into mine—when suddenly the man half rose and raised his hand towards me.

"It is very cold this evening," he said, quietly.

I was so utterly surprised at this commonplace remark from a man who seemed to be dying that I almost laughed, and forgetful of Ivan's caution, I should have answered the remark in Russ if the man himself had not spoken again after a moment's pause.

"It is colder in the mines," he said, and then he fell back.

The men sitting around the fire had all risen at his first

words, exchanging glances. One of them came over now and knelt down beside him.

"Poor Alexander Romanoff is dead," he said simply, as he looked at him.

I am awfully ashamed of myself, but somehow, when I heard that, I fainted. When I recovered consciousness, Nicholas Petrowsky was standing beside me offering me a glass of water; and I sat there where I had fallen, sipping it and almost wishing that I had gone back to New York without having an adventure at all.

In a little while Ivan came over to me. I do not think he knew I had fainted, he had been talking so earnestly with Peter Petrowsky. He looked terribly in earnest now, poor fellow, and his cheeks were almost as white as dead Alexander Romanoff's.

"Come, Charlie—we must go at once," he said, putting his hands upon my shoulder.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Petrowsky has denounced me to the police, and given an exaggerated account of my connection with the society. It is all up with me unless I can get out of Russia at once or stop Petrowsky's letter. The government has no mercy on 'Red Fingers.' Oh, why did I leave America, where I was in safety? Oh, Eleanor, Eleanor!"

The mention of my sister's name made me exercise all my wits to devise means to help Ivan; for Eleanor's last words to me had been, "I am glad you are going, Charlie—you will take care of Ivan for me!"—and I had said to myself, "No such luck—I shan't have a chance!"

"Stopping a letter! What letter?" I asked.

"One which Peter Petrowsky wrote this morning to the prefect of the police here at Dolganief. My poor friend is suffering terrible remorse now, and is as anxious as I am to have his letter stopped. But I am afraid it must have been delivered an hour ago."

"But it may still be unread. Has he described it to you?"

"Yes, poor fellow, he has done all he could. It is large, he tells me, for it contains letters of mine. The envelope is blue, and there is a large seal on the back in green wax."

"Come," I said, "we must go at once and visit the chief of police, and invent some story to induce him to give it up."

"No," said Ivan; "that would be running into the lion's mouth. I must disguise myself and go to another port. They will be waiting to arrest me on the vessel to-morrow; not a moment is to be lost!"

As he spoke, he took up his hat and stick and moved towards the door. Nicholas Petrowsky walked slowly across to it and put his back against it.

"You seem to be forgetting your promise, Mr. Zosemoff," he said quietly.

Ivan started. We had both entirely forgotten the promise he had made to remain twelve hours in Peter Petrowsky's hiding-place.

"But you hear," Ivan pleaded passionately, addressing himself to Nicholas Petrowsky and forgetting that he had given me the news in English—"your brother has denounced me to the police. If I do not escape at once, I shall never see America again. I have a wife there waiting for me. You cannot keep me to my promise."

The three men who had gathered around Alexander Romanoff's corpse looked up nonchalantly and the bearded man shook his head as Petrowsky looked toward him.

"For what has he denounced you?" he asked.

"Six years ago I was in the Society of the Red Finger——"

"And left it? Then you must look for no mercy from us," he said coldly.

Ivan's white forehead was covered with moisture. Suddenly he rushed to Peter Petrowsky's side.

"Your dying brother will speak for me," he said. "Good heaven"—as he turned—"he is dead."

Nicholas Petrowsky rushed to his brother's side; the other men all turned. I thought the opportunity too good to be lost, and slipped noiselessly out at the door. I had given no promise, and I was determined to get hold of that large blue letter with the green seal before it was opened by the chief of the Dolganief police.

I was down two flights of stairs before I heard the slightest sign of pursuit, and I almost fell down the third. I remembered that the front door closed with a latch inside, and, having reached the bottom, I was feeling for it while my pursuer was coming down the second flight of stairs.

What an age it seemed before I got that door open and was out in the court! Then I slammed the door behind me, and made my way to a narrow strip of light which told me where the street was. Out in the street I was safe; for there is one thing I can do well, and that is run. I did not run far, however, but hid in the Haymarket, waiting to see if Ivan would follow. In a little while a figure came out of the street I had left and stopped to look across the square. It was the man with the beard. He went back after standing for about five minutes, and I waited an hour for Ivan, but he never came.

I knew him well enough to be sure that he would stay his twelve hours unless released from his promise; and from what I had seen of Petrowsky's friends, I judged rightly that he would not be released. It was gruesome work waiting for him in the dark Haymarket, for not a soul was about, and all the time I could not get Alexander Romanoff's eyes out of my mind or the two sentences he had spoken as he died—"It is very cold this evening. It is colder in the mines." The words seemed to be ringing continually in my ears, and I tried in vain to drown them by repeating to myself over and over again Eleanor's last good-by when she gave Ivan into my care.

It was now after ten o'clock. If I was to do anything toward saving Eleanor's husband I must begin at once. But what could I do? Get police assistance? That would be using a dangerous remedy, and the "Red Fingers" would be pretty sure to revenge themselves by shooting Ivan before they were taken. Besides, if Ivan were free, what chance would he have of escaping from Russia if that damning blue letter reached the hands of the chief of the police? It was to the stopping of that letter that I must direct all my efforts.

So, creeping out from the Haymarket, I made the best of my way, through the streets by which we had come, in the direction of the Place of Saint Catherine. The private house of General Vanrow, the head of the Dolganief police, was not far from our hotel; Peter Petrovitch, the waiter, had pointed it out to me. While I was making my way toward it through the narrow streets filled by the people of the lowest class, a man suddenly ran out of a dark entry which I was passing, and before I knew what he was about, had snatched my watch out of my pocket and run away with it. I did not pursue him; the theft delighted me. I had been racking my brains to think of some pretext for getting into the house of the chief of police, and here Providence had furnished me with one.

It was not long before I had reached the place, passed the sentry at the gate, and was ringing at the door-bell.

although I had only the most vague ideas as to what I should do when it was answered.

The door was opened by a muscular-looking footman, to whom, in accordance with Russian etiquette, I presented a couple of kopeks before inquiring if his master was at home. The man looked at the money, pocketed it in a leisurely manner, and replied that his master was not at home. I had been fearing the two kopeks were not sufficient, so I presented the man with two more, and said it was really very important that I should see the prefect of the police at once; to which the footman replied with more friendliness, after pocketing his fee, that General Vanrow was at the neighboring town of Voushkin, and would be back possibly at midnight.

"Your master has not been at home all day?" I asked.

"He has been away since yesterday."

"And his letters—who has opened them?" I inquired, anxious to gain as much information as possible. "My business is about a letter," I explained.

"The letters have not been opened."

"Mr. Vanrow will open them to-night."

"Yes—he is pretty certain to do so. He always glances at his letters the first thing on entering the house when he has been away."

The man was growing impatient and prepared to close the door, but I prevented him by putting my foot against it.

"My business is very important. I will wait your master's arrival," I said.

Now that I knew the letter on which Ivan's fate depended was lying unopened in the house, I was almost beside myself with impatience to secure it. I tried to keep calm, however, even when the footman refused pointblank to allow me to wait, saying he would be dismissed at once if he allowed anybody to bother his master at such an unseasonable hour, when he would be worn out with his long journey. I had five kopeks left in my pocket. I gave the man one to prolong the conversation; with the other four I was contemplating the purchase of the compromising letter. This promised, however, to be a ticklish business.

"Among your master's letters," I said, rushing to the point before the effect of my *douceur* had passed off, "do you remember one in a blue envelope—a bulky one, sealed with a green seal?"

"I remember it perfectly," the man said, in a tone which encouraged me; "it arrived this afternoon."

"That letter was sent in a moment of passion," I went on; "the sender wished it unsent."

"Well," asked my listener, in a tone which did not encourage me much, "well, what do you want me to do?"

"I have here four kopeks. To-morrow I can bring you much more, if you will allow me to take back that letter to the man who sent it, and who immediately afterwards wished it unsent."

I had misjudged the man. He made no reply, but the next moment had slammed the door in my face; and I found myself standing alone on the porch. However, I would not give up the case as hopeless, but stood there waiting, at intervals ringing the bell, till at last one of the sentinels in front of the house came and turned me away.

I was wild with anxiety. Here was dear old Ivan, who had been so good to me and in whom all my sister's happiness was bound up, a prisoner for ten hours longer, while in one hour the letter would be opened which would consign him, in all probability untried, to a Siberian mine or the scaffold. One hour was left in which I might save him—if by any means I could prevent that letter from being opened which was all the while lying within a few yards of me within the gloomy walls of General Vanrow's mansion. A dozen mad plans for saving Ivan flashed into my head. I would shoot the chief of police; I would appeal to his generosity to give up that letter; I would burn down the house. But every plan seemed impracticable.

I wandered around and around the house and grounds, exciting the curiosity, I have no doubt, of the lazy-looking sentries who were placed at wide intervals around it. One of them, standing outside a small door in the garden-wall at the back, who seemed to eye me more curiously than the rest, startled me, as I was passing him for the third time, by saying, almost in a whisper:

"It is very cold this evening."

They were the very words which had been ringing in my ears ever since the wounded Nihilist fell dead immediately after uttering them. Almost mechanically I uttered the dying man's other remark:

"It is colder in the mines."

I was surprised at the effect of my words; instantly the man threw open the door before which he stood, and almost thrust me through into the dark garden.

"Quick!" he whispered. "There is a light in the supper-room; his library is below!"

The next moment I heard the door close behind me, and I was left alone to meditate on the strange fortune which had given me an entrance to Varnow's premises. I will admit that I was nervous.

I guessed, of course, that I had all unconsciously given the countersign of the "Red Fingers," and I had a vague impression that this traitor sentry had been admitting the whole society, one at a time, into the general's garden. I dared not stir, for fear of being heard by one of them, and I crouched as silently as I could beneath the bushes which grew beside the path. Before me lay the dark house. On the first floor one window alone was illuminated, all the rest were in darkness. But, as I crouched there, shivering at every rustle of the trees around me, a light appeared in the room below. It was the general's library, the sentry had told me; and, as his words recurred to me, my heart seemed to stand still. For surely the general's letters would be waiting for him in that room, and the light might mean that the chief of the police had returned, and was about to open them. The thought brought back a little courage, and I nerved myself to creep along as noiselessly as I could towards the light. It was a terrible proceeding, for in the darkness I kept stumbling every moment over flowers and shrubs, and at every sound I made I thought my heart would jump into my mouth.

The chief must have trusted very implicitly to the watch of his drowsy sentries, for the window behind which he sat was not even curtained, and, as he sat in the light of a small reading-lamp at his desk, any one with a revolver could have shot him easily enough from the spot to which I had crawled.

It was as I had feared, the opening of the letters had begun. They lay, a large pile of them, on the desk before him, and among them I recognized at once the fatal blue letter. There was no mistaking it; it lay in such a position that I could even see the seal upon it in green wax. That was the communication certainly which threatened Ivan's freedom and my sister's happiness. But what could I do now that I had discovered it? How I anathematized the cowardice which had prevented me from trying to enter the room and secure it before Vanrow's arrival! It was too late now.

One by one the letters were torn open by the officer.

The fatal missive was the seventh of those lying before him as I first caught sight of the interior of the room. Every moment the number in front of him was diminishing; every moment the time was coming nearer when I must do something for Ivan or leave him to his fate. And what to do I could not think. If I had had a revolver in my hand and had been able—which I doubt—to shoot straight, I fear that the general's moments would have been numbered, so determined was I to prevent his coming to that seventh letter.

At length, however, the moment came. The general took the missive in his hand and turned it over, examining the seal. Despair made me reckless. I rose from the spot where I had been crouching and advanced a step toward the window. I believe I actually forgot my own danger and the fact that if I made the slightest sound my own case would be almost as bad as Ivan's. One impulse alone possessed me—to prevent that compromising budget's being read. A moment more and I should have done something desperate; but, as if under the influence of my will, the general yawned and threw down the letter on his desk unopened. I drew back to the sheltering shade; and as I did so, Vanrow rose and pushed back his chair. The next instant the room was in darkness; he had blown out the lamp.

I waited breathlessly, listening and watching for his shadow on the window of the room above, telling myself that when I saw it I would open the window noiselessly, steal into the library, and escape with the blue letter in my pocket. But when the general's shadow did appear on the blind above, my task began to look a very formidable one. I tried to think of Eleanor's last words, however, and crawled along to the window, crouching down beneath the sill and raising my arms to try to push up the sash. No sooner had I touched the woodwork than it moved, and I felt the window raised out of my grasp. I drew back my hands quickly, and crept close to the wall beneath the window, not daring to breathe. It was well I could draw myself into a small space, for a man's leg came out of the room right over me, and I could just feel it touch me as he stepped out. It was almost a miracle that the man passed over me. His movements were so altogether noiseless that I had quite a superstitious dread of him. Was it a spirit? I wondered, or one of the "Red Fingers." And I scarcely knew which I feared the more. But the man's foot made no sound as he stole away from the house, and that reassured me a little.

He had left his window open. Now was the moment, I told myself, for me to enter the house and steal the letter. But I did not think I could have summoned up courage enough even then, with the window wide open for me, if it had not been that I was a little more afraid of the garden with the silent Nihilist creeping about it than of the house with only a matter-of-fact official inside. With very little noise I got into the room and, feeling my way to the desk, groped over the top of it, where I had seen the letters lying. They were all gone. I stood there completely at a loss, and then, unwilling to give up hope, groped once more over the green cloth which covered the surface of the desk. Yes—the letters were gone. But upon the desk was something which I had not seen when I looked through the window—something square with metallic sides. I passed my hands over it wonderingly.

How silent the room was! I could hear my watch ticking quite loudly, I thought. And then it flashed into my mind that my watch had been stolen—that the low, steady ticking came from this metal clock, over which my hand was wandering in its hopeless search for the letters. And with that thought I drew back my hand suddenly as if stung. But the next moment I was glad. There was time for me to escape surely, and then this terrible low-ticking machine would blow the blue letter into atoms—not a trace would be left—and with it, whether he had read it or not, the chief of the Dolganief police.

But it seemed such a pity for General Vanrow to be blown up if he had not read the letter. With a sudden impulse I rushed to the door of the library and threw it open.

"Vanrow! General Vanrow!" I shouted.

He met me at the top of the stairs with a revolver in his right hand and a wine-glass from which he had been drinking still in his left.

"Quick—escape!" I screamed. "There is an infernal machine in your library! It is going off! We shall be blown to atoms!"

He had run past me in a moment, and came out of the library with the box in his hand. I stood on the stairs unable to move, petrified by my curiosity to see what he would do.

"Come," he said, "you may help me!" as he ran into the supper-room, and I followed just in time to see him wrench open the case with a carving-fork and stop the clockwork with his fingers.

"As far as I can judge we have won by two minutes," he remarked coolly. "Did you see the thing placed?"

"A man passed me leaving by the library window," I answered.

The general turned to a speaking-tube near him, and gave a few quickly-spoken orders through it.

"I will go and search the garden," he said to me. "The villain must not escape."

As he left the room I glanced around anxiously. The apartment was a luxuriously-furnished one, and on the supper table there was a sumptuous meal. But I scarcely noted these facts. What I wanted was the blue letter. There was a desk under the window similar to the one in the room below, and I searched every drawer of it; they were all empty, however. Then I crossed the room to where thick curtains shut off a small inner room, and, as I drew them aside, I uttered an exclamation of joy, for, lying on a small table at the further end, were all the letters which I had seen on the desk in the library. Vanrow had, as I suspected, carried them upstairs with him. I turned them over quickly with trembling fingers. Yes—there was the blue letter for which I had undergone so much! I seized it eagerly. As I did so the curtains were drawn aside, and, turning at the sound, I found myself, with the letter still in my hand, face to face with the chief of the police.

"I am afraid he has escaped," he was saying as he entered. "There must be some treachery among my sentries;" and then, as he caught sight of the letter in my hand, he paused.

"That is so, or I should not be here," I said.

"And now I have to inquire," he began, in a slightly altered tone, "what you were doing so opportunely in my apartments, and how I can reward you for the service you have rendered me?"

He seemed a rather kind man. I saw there would be no good in attempting any but the real explanation of my presence.

"I came to steal this letter," I said, holding it up. "May I claim as my reward the right to burn it unread by you?"

Vanrow raised his eyebrows.

"I assure you on my honor as an American gentleman"—and I drew myself up to the full extent of my inches—

"that to burn it will harm nobody. The writer wished it unsent almost as soon as it had left his hands."

"This is not a personal matter," replied General Vanrow, shrugging his shoulders. "My duty to the State——"

"Does not require you to read a letter which the writer wished unsent," I interrupted.

"It is a very hard thing you ask."

"Which gives you the greater pleasure in granting it."

The general smiled, and I held the letter in the flame of one of the candles which stood on the table.

Ivan, true to his promise, was seated alone with the two dead men whon I found him; the "Red Fingers" had changed their quarters long before. His face was the picture of despair.

"You should not have come here, Charlie," he groaned, "the police will follow you. But of course it does not matter—I have no chance now."

For reply I pulled out of my pocket a handful of burned paper, at the sight of which Ivan started to his feet with an almost terrible look of hope in his eyes.

"What is it, Charlie—what is it?"

"Why, the letter, of course."

I laughed; and, when we were safe on board a ship, I told him the whole story.

A story by one of the greatest writers of detective fiction will be issued in our next number. It is replete with dramatic situations and rousing adventures. Do not miss this rare treat.

FACTS ABOUT WASHINGTON

HE was six feet two inches tall.

He had brown hair, which became thin and gray.

"He never knelt in church," said Bishop White, "but stood during the devotional part of the service. Mrs. Washington knelt."

His nephew, who lived for years with the Washingtons, said he was always up before sunrise. He knelt in private prayer, both morning and evening.

For some reason which his family never knew, Washington stopped taking communion years before he died. Mrs. Washington invariably remained for that service.

Washington had smallpox when a boy while visiting the Barbadoes.

He received an appointment to go in the navy when fourteen years of age, but his mother objected, and so it was given up.

Washington had a special fondness for sorrel horses. He rode a fine one at the Battle of Trenton.

Fairly close neighbors as they were, Washington and Jefferson never saw each other after Washington retired from the presidency, nearly three years before his death. They were not on friendly terms at that period.

When Lafayette and Rochambeau wrote to Washington, which they did frequently, according to the Washington *Star*, they employed the English language, although Rochambeau wrote in French and had his letters translated before mailing.

All the States took official action upon the farewell address, and several States did the unusual thing of having it bound as a part of their laws.

Washington was the only person whose birthday was publicly celebrated while he still lived. February 22 was quite widely observed while he was president.

John Adams, while president, in Philadelphia, refused to sanction the celebration of Washington's birthday on the ground, as he afterward said, that it was a slight upon the highest official of the land to honor thus a private citizen.

Washington died at the beginning of the last hour of the day, of the last day of the week, of the last month of the year, of the last year of the century.

VOLCANOES IN AN AMERICAN PARK

THE Hawaiian National Park, created by Congress, is the first national park lying outside the continental boundaries of the United States. It sets apart three celebrated Hawaiian volcanoes, Kilauea, Mauno Lao and Haleakala.

"The Hawaiian volcanoes," writes T. A. Jagger, director of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, "are truly a national asset, wholly unique of their kind, and the most continuously, variously and harmlessly active volcanoes on earth. Kilauea crater has been nearly continuously active with a lake or lakes of molten lava for a century. Mauna Loa is the largest active volcano and mountain mass in the world, with eruptions about once a decade, and has poured out more lava during the last century than any other volcano on the globe. Haleakala has a crater rift in its summit eight miles in diameter and 3,000 feet deep, with many high lava cones built up inside the crater. It is probably the largest of all known craters among volcanoes that are known as active. Haleakala erupted less than 200 years ago. The crater at sunrise is the grandest volcanic spectacle on earth."

The lava lake at Kilauea is the main feature of the new national park. It draws visitors from all over the world. It is a lake of fire 1,000 feet long, splashing on its banks with a noise like waves of the sea, while great fountains boil through it fifty feet high, sending quantities of glowing spray over the shore. Gases hiss and rumble and blue flames play through crevasses.

There have been occasional crises, Mr. Jagger recently testified before the House Committee on the Public Lands, when the active crater was upheaved into a hill and thereafter collapsed into a deep pit with marvelously spectacular avalanches and fiery grottoes, cascades, whirlpools and rapids of glowing metal were common.

Mauna Lao is capped with perpetual snow. It is two and a half miles high.

Around the base of these vast volcanoes are gorgeous tropical forests. Sandalwood, elsewhere extinct, grows there luxuriously. There are mahogany groves, forests of tree ferns forty feet high, and magnificent tropical jungles alternating with green meadows. There are also tracts of desert and wonderful lava caves.

THE LADY OF THE TOLL-GATE HOUSE

By KATHERINE STAGG

ANDREW D. MANNING, 2d, a celebrated criminologist, leaned deeper in the big leather chair, and puffed thoughtfully at his very black cigar.

"Yes, it was a white satin slipper, in the middle of a road, on a moonlight night, that decided the question of my career."

Something between a rumble and chuckle sounded from the grizzled beard.

"Do you think you could be interested in a story that had neither a motor nor a telephone in it? For this happened before those twin inventions speeded up life in general."

"I'd love to hear any reminiscence of yours, sir."

He chuckled again. "I suppose white satin slippers have decided the course of many a man's life, but this case happened in rather a peculiar way. My father wanted me to follow the law, as he called it in his old-fashioned phraseology. Somehow I had a feeling that it would continue to be a case of 'following' if I tried that line, and I, naturally, had an idea I'd like to lead once in a while. I was just out of college, where instead of going through the time of poetic measles, or measly poetics that attack most young men at least once in their youth, I had burrowed in all the available libraries, and had read bushels of detective and criminal lore.

"Just about that time the country was flooded with accounts of the notorious doings of one James Gulick, at least that was the best known of his several names. He was said to be the most daring bank thief of the age, and it was even thought that he had 'got his man' on more than one occasion. He had gotten away with a large sum from the First National Bank of Montauk in one of the middle Western States, and there was a reward of ten thousand dollars for his capture.

"Ten thousand dollars was a lot of money, and I felt a great inward call for that reward; I spent days thinking up more or less wild schemes, but nothing either sensible or tangible suggested itself. It would take a deuce of a long time to make that much out of the law, let alone years of study, and I was young, hot-headed, and in a hurry to get and enjoy the good things of life.

"I was born on the Fourth of July, and I think I had absorbed something of the fireworks of that day into my system, for the slow way of doing things never did appeal to me, at least not for many years.

"On my twenty-first birthday I had a party up in a remote hotel, or, more properly speaking, tavern, in a small village that nestled in a spur of the hills back of the Catskill Mountains. Old John Barleycorn was not a stranger in those days, in fact most of the young fellows were pretty chummy with the old bird.

"A twenty-first birthday and Fourth of July together was a fine excuse to open up, and none of our party had neglected the chance, including myself.

"I had a dandy team of ponies I had hired for the celebration, and, let me tell you right now, that no automobile that ever skated or skidded can equal the real live feel of the reins over a pair of prancing, fiery horses that know your voice, and can answer your mood. Cars are all very well, and great sport, of course, but a horse is alive. I was stopping for a few weeks at a place called Silver Lake, about ten miles from where the talkfest and drinkfest party had taken place. When the ponies were brought around, some one called out: 'Don't forget the toll-gate on top of the Shawangump Mountain, and try to drive right through without stopping.'

" 'That's all right,' I shouted; 'I've got a pocket-full of firecrackers, and I'll bet Toll-Gate Jake will know when I get there, and I've got something else in the other pocket that always helps in any argument,' not meaning a weapon, for I thought I was miles from being afraid; no, it was just an extra bottle that I had with great forethought provided.

"Away I flew, as happy as a boy would naturally be at such a time. I wound up and up the lonely mountain road, singing lustily, if not very musically.

"Say, did you ever hear a loon call in a lonely place at night? Well, I tell you right now, it is about the weirdest sound in the whole orchestra of animals, wild or tame. I'd had just about enough of applejack mixed with real champagns—for we were not pikers, even in that neck of the woods—to get an idea that the loon was following me, and that we were holding some kind of crazy duet, or song-a-logue.

"Gad! Maybe some influence was guiding either me or the bird, or both, for it sure brought results.

"Taking a generous gulp from my pocket ammunition, I jumped from the vehicle with a wild idea of catching the loon; I really felt for the moment that nothing in life meant so much to me as owning that bird. What strange impulses alcohol will start. Not half of the psychology of booze has ever been written.

"I had a little sense left, for I remember tying the ponies to a tree with elaborate caution. This done, I wandered down a path in the direction the loon seemed to have taken, calling every minute or so in a great variety of tones that I fancied were as wild as any produced by the wood creatures; I guess maybe they were. Anyhow, I went on for some distance, but the path kept getting more and more swampy, and just seemed to end in a bog; the loon, too, seemed to have doubled on itself, so I turned back, but I must have mistaken the way, for I came out at a place further on where there was no trace of my ponies. This would have given me much disquiet if I had been in a normal state of mind. Then the moon came out with a brilliant flash, lighting the whole scene like fairyland.

"And right there in the middle of the road was the small satin slipper. I picked it up, in one second utterly forgetting my quest of the loon.

"I think I indulged in a lengthy and eloquent strophe addressed to this unknown Cinderella.

"In my state of applejackillic bliss, I rather expected the owner of the slipper to step gaily out of a tree, and claim her property. But as nothing like that happened, I started out to investigate.

"At a turn in the road, I saw a light about a hundred yards ahead. I knew this must be the toll-gate, as there was no other human habitation for miles around. You must remember this was nearly forty years ago. Probably there is a clubhouse and a jazz band there now.

"I had heard many stories of Toll-Gate Jake, and even a

hint of a murder mystery connected with him. Of course, this whetted my curiosity, but just then I heard the sound of horses' hoofs galloping behind me. I must have been born lucky, for danger never occurred to me; in fact, by this time, I rather thought I owned that mountain, and everything in sight. Waving the slipper, I jumped to the middle of the road, calling to the ponies by name.

"They were knowing little beasts, and I caught them without more injury than a twisted ankle, but that did not bother me at first. I flung myself into the carriage, and dashed up to the gate, but no gaunt figure answered my calls or knocks. The place was as silent as Death itself.

"I was not exactly frightened, but I began to feel as if the Angel Gabriel had made his rounds; that I was forgotten, and left all alone in some bewitched country.

"I jumped to the little porch, and pushed open the door. There was no one there but a selfish-looking cat. I looked about, and then ventured to push open the door of an inner room. I saw what fairly took my breath away.

"The room ran across the wider part of the house, and was screened from view by arbors covered thickly with vines. I have seen many fine and artistic interiors in my time, but never anything more daintily beautiful. There was a very riot of coloring, but blended in perfect taste. Strangest object of all was a charmingly carved shelf of ivory of Chinese design which held about a dozen tinsel crowns.

"Toll-Gate Jake might eat me alive, but I must find the queen of the crowns and the slipper.

"Securing the ponies to a regular tie-post this time, I started back up the road.

"With a sense of trying the power of an incantation, I began to hum 'Follow on, follow on,' from 'The Belle of New York,' a musical play in vogue then.

"I had not gone very far, when I was really startled, this time by a voice whispering at my elbow: 'Hush! Don't let her see you; she is just beyond that large tree; let me go first.'

"With mechanical obedience, I made way for him, for I felt it must be Toll-Gate Jake, and by this time I was ready for anything natural or supernatural.

"A pipe thrust in his pocket, and the strong smell of tobacco made me feel that Jake, at least, was not a spirit. I meekly followed, and after a few steps I saw seated on a rock, completely embowered in vines, a tiny girl-woman, dressed in white—and with a slipper missing.

"With a sign to me to keep back, Jake approached her, knelt, and from the same deep pocket where he had bestowed his pipe, he drew a tinsel crown like those I had seen on the ivory shelf.

"'Your highness! The court has arrived. What would your highness plan for the amusement of the morrow? Will it be a holiday?'

"No one can imagine how strange these words sounded from the gaunt mountain man. One would have supposed his stock of language to be limited to the phrases of the usual countryman.

"Before my bewildered vision I then saw played as pretty a little scene between courtier and queen as though the best annals of chivalrous history had been rifled of their pride.

"There was some talk of a prisoner of war, but Jake's reply to this seemed to be halting and confused, as if that part of the play were new to him.

"A pallor suddenly seemed to claim the child, the large eyes faltered and closed.

"Jake tenderly picked her up in his arms, and her head dropped to his shoulder, fast asleep.

"As we went back to the house, he whispered her story to me, 'motherless—and this way since a fall in her childhood.'

"By this time, my twisted ankle had become very painful, and the sobering effects of the tragi-comedy that I had witnessed cleared my head as nothing else could have done."

Manning almost forgot me and his telling of the story; he was thinking back over the years, and romance lit the keen gray eyes.

After a pause, he took another very black cigar from the table, and thoughtfully cut the end.

"I always did seem to get next to men more easily than most people, but in all my life I have never felt quite so flattered by the confidence shown in me as the experience that I went through the next few days.

"My ankle was so bad that Jake put up my horses, and let me use the couch in their front room, a sort of office. The very fact that I had to have some waiting on seemed to appeal to the poor little insane princess when she made her appearance the next day.

"Jake tried to keep her in the cottage, but she would stray off in the woods, never very far.

"Once or twice I asked him what she meant by her prisoner of war, but he seemed to think it did not mean anything in particular.

"But when I had seen through the screen of vines that twice she had disappeared carrying a basket of food, I felt that I was on the verge of still another mystery.

"Very gradually I won her confidence, and when I was able to hobble about again, I persuaded her to let me go with her and carry the basket.

"We threaded a perfect maze of forest and outcropping rocks, until we came to a dense thicket.

"Pulling aside the tangled growth, the entrance to a small cave was disclosed.

"In that cave was no other than the lean and perceptibly worried person of James Gulick, bank robber, and maybe murderer.

"I had him; and inside of a month I had collected the ten thousand dollars reward; and was started on the thorny path of a criminologist."

"And the poor little Cinderella?" I asked.

"Wonderful operations have been performed for removing clots of blood from the brain," he went on. "My wife has a trunk hidden away in a closet that contains a dozen or more tinsel crowns; she never opens it without a prayer of thanksgiving."

TEAM OBEYED SIGN

A TEAM of horses owned by an Indianapolis, Ind., wholesale grocery company decided to move without their driver. The horses, drawing a dray, started slowly. They were just behind the white line at Meridan and Maryland streets when the traffic man turned the semaphore. The "stop" sign faced the horses, and they stopped. In a few minutes the traffic man turned the semaphore and the "go" sign faced the horses. They went. As the team stopped at the "stop" sign and started at the "go" sign the traffic man failed to notice they were driverless. The horses slowly walked to the next corner and again the "stop" sign was up. The horses stopped. The horses had apparently been well trained in this respect. And this is the way the driver caught them.

A DETECTIVE'S EXPERIENCE

By WILLIAM MAXWELL

MR. CLAYDON appeared to be singularly unfortunate in his cash transactions with the people who traded with him. Several of those from whom he received payments succeeded in passing bad money into his hands, and as in every case the base coins were counterfeit, he was put to a very serious loss. A few actual losses of this kind caused him to look very closely to all the money he received, and to adopt another plan by which he might trace the base coin to the source from which it had come. When he received cash payments for his goods he made of each sum so received a little package, and on the outside of the paper wrapper marked the amount, the date of receipt, and the name of the person from whom received. These little packets of coin he placed in a drawer in his safe, from which he subsequently took them to deposit in the bank when the aggregate value exceeded the large sum of ready money which he always kept on hand.

But notwithstanding Mr. Claydon's scrupulous care, he found that some bad sovereigns still escaped his observation. When he drew upon his pockets to pay others, some of the coins were refused as bad. The counterfeits were found in different packets, in moneys that had been paid by people who lived miles apart, and had no apparent knowledge of each other.

In each of these cases Mr. Claydon had carried the bad coins to the person named on the packet in which it had been found, and, after earnest and angry protestations from payer and receiver, had succeeded in procuring good money for the worthless counterfeits.

A Mr. Larcom had paid Clayton a sum of $140. A week later Claydon had occasion to use this money. The gentleman to whom he tendered it, in counting over the gold, instantly detected four bad eagles. Mr. Claydon's astonishment soon gave place to anger. He made good the money, told the gentleman how often he had thus been imposed on, and showed the wrapper from which he had just taken the money, with the name of the payer and the date of the receipt plainly written on it with ink.

Leaving a man in charge of his place, he hastened to Mr. Larcom and reported the painful discovery he had made. He threw the counterfeit eagles on the counter before Larcom. That gentleman looked at them, and very positively declared they were not part of the money he had paid. He contended that no man who had sense enough to know a dime from an eagle could take such coins for good money. They had never been in his possession. He could not understand how they and other coins of that kind he had heard of came to be in Claydon's possession, and he certainly was not to be frightened into giving good gold for such rubbish.

Well, that was the origin of the case Claydon vs. Larcom. It was gone into very fully, and in the end Claydon won. Larcom paid four eagles in lieu of the bad money, but he paid it, declaring that he had been defrauded by Claydon, as others had been.

It hardly need be said that this singular case excited a great deal of attention in secret service headquarters. It was very keenly discussed among officers and men in the detective department; and when orders were received to employ the most experienced men to find, if possible, the person who was responsible for the issue of the base coins, I was given the case.

My first care was to learn all I could of Mr. Larcom. In a few days I had gained so much information by judicious inquiries in different quarters, that I might be said to know almost as much of that gentleman as he knew of himself. In business and in private life he was represented as being equally honest; at home an exemplary husband and father, and in trade a man of undoubted probity and honor.

I learned, too, that he was deeply hurt by the decision which forced him to pay four eagles in lieu of the counterfeits which Claydon had charged him with passing. That decision was made in the belief that he had actually paid the false money. It was not pretended that he had done so knowingly, and with intent to defraud. But he still vehemently asserted that it was impossible he should take such money himself or offer it to another, simply because a glance was enough to convince him of its spurious character. He believed that Claydon, finding himself in possession of the worthless pieces, had dishonestly and unscrupulously sworn he had received them from him in order to procure the full sum which they falsely represented. He made this statement freely whenever the case was mentioned in his hearing, usually adding that Claydon would yet hear more than he wished to hear about the spurious coins he had been producing so often of late.

I then learned that other cases of a similar character had not been brought to the notice of the authorities, because the parties blamed had given good money for bad. Mr. Larcom's resistance to the claim made on him made them think that they, too, had been the victims of fraud, and they said some very unpleasant things of Claydon's honesty.

It is an old axiom that you should not condemn any man before his guilt has been proved beyond doubt. It is to be feared, however, that judicial axioms have little weight with the majority of men when forming their judgments of others. I may confess that when I went to call on Mr. Claydon, a week after the case in which he figured had been put in my hands, I did not think he was one of the very few immaculate sons of men. The fact that so much "queer" money had passed through his hands appeared to me singular, to say the least; and the additional fact that he had received $85 satisfied me that some one, whom it was my business to find, was gaining money at the rate of nineteen hundred per cent on the original outlay, enhanced by ingenuity and daring audacity.

I led Mr. Claydon to believe that the authorities at Washington were anxious to sift the matter of this base coinage to the bottom. It was my purpose to get as much information as I could on the subject, and if he could show me that it was impossible to tamper with the money after it came into his possession, Mr. Larcom would be required to explain how so many spurious coins chanced to be in his possession at one time, and why they should be all put off in a single payment to one person.

To my surprise, Mr. Claydon evinced the utmost readiness not only to answer my questions, but to reveal every particular of his system of conducting his cash transac-

tions. Taking me into his private office, he opened his safe, and in that the little drawer in which it was his custom to keep little packets of money wrapped and marked as I have before described. There were then a few packets in the drawer, and when I asked whether he felt quite assured there were no spurious tens among them, he lifted out one which was marked "$110.25." He counted out the money, which was made up of ten gold eagles and eight half-eagles. I also looked over the coins and found that they were all as sound and pure as when they had been issued from the mint. While returning the money to the paper from which he had taken it, he said:

"Think how I may, I can't explain how I could be imposed on as I have been. I look closely at every piece of gold I receive before I give a written receipt for the whole sum, and I did not think it possible that any man could deceive me with such very poor metal as the eagles appear to be made of."

"It is very extraordinary," I assented. "But that does not alter the fact that you have received for eagles things that were not gold. Has your clerk, or any other person in your employ, access to your money at any time?"

"Never. I do not keep a clerk. I do not allow any one to give a receipt for money, so that all the coin coming into the place must pass through my own hands, and all the bills due are paid by myself. As I live in the house above, it is not necessary that I should intrust much of my business to others. Only one of the men who work for me ever enters this room on any occasion. He is a man who does the general work about the place, and has slept in a room on the top floor about four months, I think. He is a willing and useful man. If he were dishonest, which I know he is not, he could not touch money, as the keys of the safe never leave my possession on any pretense whatever. I don't think my wife has once opened the safe since I have lived there."

All this Mr. Claydon told without hesitation. I couldn't detect the least suggestion of insincerity in any of his statements, yet I did not wholly lay aside the suspicions I had entertained when I entered his place. I confessed that I was not any nearer to the solution of the puzzle, but I hoped my superiors in the force would be able to turn my report to some account.

"By the way," I added, "I shall be asked for the name of the man who sleeps in the house."

"It is Christopher Wade, a quiet, attentive fellow, who seems to have the knack to mind his own business and attend to mine. I will call him in if you would like to speak to him."

"No, no," I said, holding up my hand to detain him as he was turning to the door. "Men in my business do not wish to be too widely known. I shall see him as I go out. I must ask you to keep my business and the real cause of this visit a profound secret. Let him think that I have called to buy from you, or anything he pleases, but do not let him even suspect that I am an officer of the detective force, and do not mention my name."

Mr. Claydon promised that he would be as discreet as I could wish.

I was about to leave when I expressed satisfaction that he had not lost anything by the worthless money that had passed through his hands.

"But I have lost a great deal," he said hastily and angrily. "Though only a week has passed since I had the case against Mr. Larcom, I already feel that my business is injured and my character blackened in the minds of my business friends and customers. He goes about spreading the most ruinous reports of me. He says I got the bad money from some source, and that I forced him and others to make it good by fraud. He has hinted that I may have more of the same kind for which I will try to get good money from others—in fact, he has led people to believe that I can and do make imitation eagles to stick people in that way. But he shall suffer for his slander. I shall prosecute him for defamation of character, and shall make him pay damages to recompense me for some of the mischief he is doing. You may mention that if you like, for I am fully resolved to do what I say."

I merely said it might be better to defer any action of that kind for a few weeks, until he could clearly prove actual damage. Mr. Claydon was resolute, however. It was not ony part of my duty to advise in such a case, so I soon left him to nurse his wrath, or let it cool, as he thought best.

Nothing could be more candid and unrestrained than Mr. Claydon's manner throughout our interview, yet I could not or would not divest myself of the suspicion that he was either the sole offender, or an accomplice in the crime of "showing the queer."

I felt assured that spurious money came from Mr. Claydon's house in the first instance, yet there was nothing in the man's manner or appearance to suggest either craft or criminality. But I had before found that apparent simplicity only masked guile of the darkest dye, and now I felt that the house of Mr. Claydon and its inmates called for more particular watching than I had before thought it necessary to bestow.

I had quietly but closely observed the man Wade as I passed through the store. There was nothing in his appearance to attract or repay observation. He was a middle-aged man, and as completely engrossed by the dusting of some of his employer's fancy goods as any good clerk could be. Yet I noticed that the keen gray eyes met mine while I looked at him, and I thought him a person likely to know more of his employer's private business than he would reveal on slight occasion.

I went home from Mr. Claydon's house in 6th Avenue, and made changes in my general appearance which I thought sufficient to make the lately respectable-looking gentleman pass muster among a lot of tolerably able-bodied, but otherwise, not over-presentable workingmen.

I was again in 6th Avenue an hour before the time at which Mr. Claydon closed his shop. Without approaching the house too closely, I contrived to watch it narrowly. My attention was at last attracted by a woman whom I knew as one who had been convicted of passing phony money, and who was known to be connected with people who lived in semi-respectable style, though no one appeared to know how the wherewithal for living was secured.

This woman appeared to be loitering purposely about the corner for a few minutes, then she walked up the street toward Claydon's shop. When she reached that establishment she stopped a few seconds to look in through the glass door, arranged her hat as if she stood before a mirror, and then continued her walk.

When she had gone about twenty yards past the shop, she turned and walked back again. She loitered at the end of the street where I had first seen her, and I selected a post some distance away from which to continue my observations.

I at once concluded that this woman's presence would afford me some clew to the heart of the puzzle I desired to solve. I expected that Mr. Claydon would come to see her. If he should, then I might conclude that the woman was a party to his fraud. She might be the provider of the counterfeits, for I knew she had already undergone imprisonment for passing a lead dollar, and her inability to account for another which had been found concealed on her person.

But I was doomed to disappointment. Mr. Claydon did not come out to speak to the woman. Soon the shutters were fastened on the glass door of his shop, and a couple of minutes later the trusty and "mind-your-own-business" Wade hastened down the street and spoke to the woman. They conversed a few moments very earnestly and with some degree of heat, as I inferred from Wade's gesticulations. Soon they shook hands and parted, Wade returning to Claydon's, the woman moving in an opposite direction and approaching me.

When the woman passed me I followed her. She entered a 5th Avenue 'bus, and I climbed to a seat on the top of the same vehicle. Nearly midway between Madison Square and 42d Street she alighted, and I alighted at the same time. I hastened on a few paces, then stopped as if to look at some article in a jeweler's window, but really to watch the woman without turning my face toward her.

The woman turned into a west side street, which was little better in appearance than the worst of the streets in which poor people reside. I saw her enter a house, and walking slowly along the sidewalk a few minutes later I distinctly noted the appearance of every window and the door. I also noted the number of the house. When I had walked through the street I asked a policeman who was on duty there who lived in No. 527.

"I don't know much about that house," he said, "but the name of the people is Medley. They seem to be pretty quiet. I suppose it's because there ain't so many people in that house as lives in the other houses about here. Seems to be only Peter Medley and his wife an' one lodger; but I don't know the lodger's name."

The guardian of the peace was unusually communicative. I thanked him for the information. I again walked past the house, and then chose a place near its farthest end from which I could keep the house under observation without appearing to be on the watch for anything or anybody in particular.

Nearly an hour had passed when the woman whom I had ascertained to be Mrs. Medley, again came out of the house. She was now accompanied by two men. I followed them for a considerable distance, keeping as close as I could without attracting observation. At length they entered a saloon side door, and I, going in by another door, found myself in the next apartment, only a wooden partition about six feet in height separating me from the people in whom I felt so keenly interested.

While I partook of a needed glass of 2.75 beer, I could distinctly hear what was said beyond the partition, though the people spoke in low, moderated tones. One of the men called for a drink, for which he paid.

"Confound that Larcom! I thought Chris. would have a couple for you to-day, Bess," said one of the men, whom I concluded to be the woman's husband from the familiar way in which he uttered the name.

"I thought so, too," she replied. "But you may be sure Chris. knows what he's about. The old man is more careful than ever; but Chris.'ll work it by to-morrow for one or two. He says there was a stranger there this morning—a tall fellow, shaved, only with a brown mustache. He doesn't know what he wanted; but if he's paid any money, he'll work it on that.'"

"But we can't live on wind. We'll have to try a 'rush' somewhere, as old Claydon won't do just yet."

"Might as well be here as anywhere else, I think," said the other man. "That waiter seems an easy sort. What do you think?"

"I'll try. If it works. I'll go straight home."

Mrs. Medley said to the waiter:

"Fill these again, please."

The glasses were soon replenished. The woman laid a coin gently on the metal top of the table to pay for the drink. The waiter picked it up and said:

"A gold eagle?"

"Yes; I wish I had more of them. Will you give me a five spot in the change, please?" the woman said easily and pleasantly.

The change was soon counted out, and it contained a five dollar note as desired. Then the eagle was dropped into a cash register. The people in the next compartment soon partook of their refreshment. The woman went out first, the men following a few seconds later.

What a discovery I had made! I should be able to bring to justice not only Mr. Claydon, but a whole gang of confederates and accomplices who were engaged in the making of bad coins and in fraudulently imposing them on honest people. Chris. was certainly Mr. Claydon's man—"a quiet fellow, whom he knew to be honest"—and the old man who had become so exceedingly careful of late must be no other than Mr. Clayton. By cautious proceedings I might be able to capture the coiner or coiners actually at work.

I felt sure the coin which the woman had passed to the bartender was a counterfeit, but I should have ocular proof of the fact. I obtained a few words in private with the saloonkeeper, in consequence of which he opened the till, and, taking out the only eagle it contained, at once verified my opinion.

When I reported progress to my superiors in the chief office next morning, I found that others had been not less active than myself in seeking to bring the maker and circulator of the base coin to punishment.

Mr. Larcom, and five others who had suffered, had made a joint statement before the magistrate on the preceding day, and a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Claydon had been issued in consequence. He had been lodged in prison in the evening, so that he must have been arrested soon after I left 6th Avenue, when following Mrs. Medley. He would be taken before the magistrate that morning.

I was not pleased to be thus forestalled, but I thought I still held the most important clew to the nefarious business. I obtained a search warrant and requested that I might be allowed to follow my own plans in continuing the arrest and conducting the search.

Having procured Mr. Claydon's keys and secured the services of a cop in plain clothes, in addition to a deputy sheriff, to superintend the search, we set out for 6th Avenue without delay. Arrived there, I saw Christopher Wade, who still looked as if he could mind only his own business, notwithstanding the disturbing events that had so recently occurred. At my request Mrs. Claydon was asked to be present when we opened the safe, and she came down-stairs looking excessively haggard and distressed. I first opened the drawer in which the packets of money were kept. Each packet was opened, and in one containing $35 we discovered a counterfeit eagle.

"I don't think Mr. Holland will be asked to make that good!" I remarked, having read the name on the wrapper.

I then took out the packet Mr. Claydon had shown me on the preceding day. On counting over the money, I was astounded to find that two of the eagles were counterfeit. They were not in the packet when Mr. Claydon allowed me to examine the money, and must have been substituted for two of the coins I had seen, after I had left the place.

In a corner at the bottom of the safe we found a small packet wrapped in a piece of a letter. On opening this, we found seventeen coins precisely like the counterfeit we had recently discovered in the packets that lay in the drawer. A flask, some powdered chalk, and a pair of molds, exactly corresponding to the head and the reverse side of the base money were also found.

There was conclusive proof of Mr. Claydon's guilt.

These coining implements, together with the packets of money and the spurious eagles, were immediately carried to the court by the search officer. Mr. Claydon was before the magistrate when they arrived. The judge on the bench commented on the grave nature of the charge, but concluded that there was not any incriminating evidence to warrant the further detention of Mr. Claydon. The arrival of the important evidence I had discovered in the safe gave the case a wholly different aspect. Mr. Claydon could only assert that he knew nothing of the coining implements, nor of the counterfeit money. He had never seen them before they were produced in court, and he could swear they were not in the safe when he closed it last evening. These protestations, however, were as nothing in the face of the evidence, and Claydon was formally committed to take trial.

While the search of the safe was in progress, the deputy, obeying my instructions, had stood near the door of the shop ready to prevent Wade from leaving the premises if he should attempt to do so. I had directed the search officer to send me three reserve men from the nearest police station as soon as possible, and had intimated that there was more searching to be done. While awaiting the arrival of the men, I kept the steady and silent Mr. Wade company.

The search officer arrived at nearly the same time. When I heard of Mr. Claydon's committal, I remarked that we should have stronger evidence in the case and more culprits in prison before many hours had passed.

"We have to make a thorough search, Mr. Wade, and I must ask you to show us your bedroom," I said.

"I can't very well leave the shop. My room is on the top floor—Mrs. Claydon or the servant will show it to you," he replied, doggedly.

"I will not trouble Mrs. Claydon. I will close the door of the shop and you must come with us," I said.

"I don't see that I must. You might speak to a man differently, I think. But I'll go if you want me to," he said, doggedly.

I did not close the door, but left two of the policemen in the shop. The other I instructed by a glance merely, which, however, sufficiently intimated that he was to consider Wade as given into his custody.

In Wade's bedroom, beside the bed, the principal article of furniture was a big chest, which I told him to open. He did so, and we turned over the articles of clothing it contained, but found nothing else.

"The box appears to be very shallow. It is much smaller inside than one would think," I remarked.

"Oh, yes. It has a false bottom. I have seen boxes like this before," said the deputy, turning it around and pressing his finger on a little knob near one of the feet until a sharp click was heard. Then he drew out a drawer at the bottom, the existence of which could not be suspected by any one looking at the front.

In this drawer we found a number of counterfeit coins, molds, files, drills and other implements. It contained a bunch of keys also, and one of them was the same in design as Mr. Clayton's key of the safe.

Instantly the whole truth flashed on my mind. Christopher Wade was the culprit. He had keys that would open any door in the house, and one which corresponded to the mold would open the safe. He it was who inserted the base coins in Mr. Claydon's money packets in place of the good money which he took away.

Christopher Wade had started toward the door when he heard mention of the false bottom in the box, but the cop had gripped his collar and I had made a step toward him. These actions induced him to change his intention.

I considered that my work arising out of the Claydon vs. Larcom case was practically done. Soon as Wade was securely confined in a cell I took the three cops with me and we raided the house No. 527. There we found enough to satisfy us that we had alighted on the headquarters of the gang of coiners, which consisted of the Medleys, a man named North, and Christopher Wade. All were in prison before nightfall, and when the case was presented to the magistrate next day, Mr. Claydon was liberated on his own recognizance.

The real culprits were condemned to long terms, and thus did Mr. Claydon escape punishment for a crime he had not committed.

A puzzling mystery story is to be one of the best contributions in our next number. We are sure you will like it.

TAKE NOTICE!

The feature stories that have been published in this magazine are well worth reading, if you have not already seen them. The list is as follows:

NO.
1 THE EEL MAN, by Robert Carlton Brown
2 ZITANA OF MAISON ROUGE, by F. W. Doughty
3 THE MYSTERIOUS WEB, by Armstrong Perry
4 UNDER THE HYPNOTIC SPELL, by Dr. H. Enton
5 THE SILKEN SHEATH, by Crittenden Marriott
6 A FORTUNE TELLER'S SECRET, by Gladys Hall
7 THE MYSTIC EMBLEM, by Marie Coolidge Rask
8 THE CARDS OF FATE, by William Goode
9 MR. BACHELLER'S APARTMENTS, By William Hamilton Osborne
10 THE INNER WHEEL, by Octavius Roy Cohen
11 THE VOICE OF THE VALLEY, by Robert C. Brown
12 THE SIGN OF THE SEVEN SHARKS, by Charles F. Oursler
13 UNDER A MASK, by Crittenden Marriott
14 CASE 4,444, by Gladys Hall
15 AFTER A MILLION, by Police Captain Howard
16 SHADOWING THE BLUE TRIANGLE, by Charles F. Oursler
17 THE CASE OF CAPTAIN FORTESQUE, by R. Ingalls
18 THE BIRD-HEADED SPHINX, by Edith S. Tupper
19 A DOUBLE MYSTERY, by Dr. Harry Enton
20 THE MAGICIAN DETECTIVE, by C. F. Oursler
21 KING COBRA MYSTERY, by George Gilbert
22 THE HAUNTED CORRIDORS, by Wm. H. Osborne
23 NO MAN'S MAN, by Maxwell Smith
24 THE TREVOR PUZZLE, by T. C. Harbaugh
25 THE TRAIL OF ROSES, by Edmund Condon
26 THE HINDOO VANISHING CLUE, by Pauline C. Bouve.
27 WHO WAS GUILTY? by Beulah Poynter
28 THE EVIL EYE, by Chas. F. Oursler
29 THE THIRTEENTH DOOR, by Edith Sessions Tupper
30 THE GAME OF DETECTIVE CAREW, by L. Jerome
31 LAW-MAKER AND LAW-BREAKER, by Beulah Poynter
32 THE COUNTERFEIT HEIRESS, by Inspector John Harrigan
33 TRACKED TO CHINA, by Chief Roger O'Brien
34 AFTER THE GERMAN SPIES, by May Halsey Miller
35 THE CLUE IN THE BOX, by Alexander Douglas
36 TRAILED BY A FRENCH DETECTIVE, by Rene Renaud
37 A DROP OF INK, by Lieutenant Robert W. Warden
38 THE TEN DOCTORS, by Allan Arnold Fox
39 THE STAIN ON PAGE 61, by Chas. T. Jordan
40 A MASKED MYSTERY, by Police Sergeant Kelly.
41 THE BLACK SOUL, by Beulah Poynter.
42 SANCTUARY, by William Hamilton Osborne.
43 THE MYSTERY OF THE SEVEN SHADOWS, by Charles F. Oursler.

If you cannot procure any of the numbers you want from your newsdealer, send us the price, ten cents, in money or postage stamps, and we will mail them to you postage free. Address

FRANK TOUSEY, Publisher, 168 West 23d St., New York.

STORIES OF GREAT DETECTIVES

BY A NEW YORK JOURNALIST

The writer has had occasion professionally to learn a great deal about the real detectives. He has talked with them, corresponded with them, heard the narrative of their lives and exploits, and enjoyed in reality all the interest and excitement connected with these men that is constantly presented in the fiction of the day.

For the benefit of the thousands of readers of "Mystery Magazine," we propose to relate some of our experiences, and give a rapid glance at the most noted men in the different cities of the United States. The number of professional detectives is now very large. They are employed in every branch of the United States Government; all the great cities have a trained force, and the private agencies are to be found in all the cities, with correspondents throughout the civilized world. Our "Stories of Great Detectives" give, perhaps, the first familiar relation ever attempted of the characteristics of the great detectives who have made the detection of crime a new science.

JOHN P. HORR.

JOHN P. HORR was another of the prominent private detectives of the city of Chicago, Ill. He was a genial and kindly gentleman, but one of the keenest and most intelligent of detectives. The Chicago *Daily News* gives the details of an interesting case worked up by Mr. Horr.

"Fred Wilson, a young man from Independence, Iowa, was arrested in this city on a charge of forgery, involving an aggregate of $1,250. His arrest culminates a career, brief but brilliant, in which the young man has displayed a most interesting mixture of shrewdness and gullibility.

"On the 18th of the present month—namely, a week ago Thursday—notice was reecived at the private detective agency of J. P. Horr & Co., that the name of John Dick, a wealthy grain-dealer in Independence, had been forged upon two checks of $50 and $1,200, respectively; that the forger was Fred Wilson, and that he had fled to Chicago.

"The story of the forgery was that Wilson was employed by Dick in the capacity of confidential clerk. Dick kept his accounts with the First National Bank, where he frequently had large sums of money. It was his practice to draw checks, for money when he required it, inclose the check in a letter, and send Wilson to the bank with both papers securely sealed.

"Wilson performed his task with singular fidelity, and stood well with his employer. It has developed, however, that he was all this time making a special study of Dick's handwriting, with a view of making a strike.

"By the latter part of last month he felt that he was sufficiently proficient to make a trial of his skill, and accordingly tried his hand on a check for $50. The paper was accepted without question, and the money paid. Flattered by his success, the boy conceived a larger scheme of robbery. He quietly made preparations for leaving home, and when all was ready came to the front with a forced check for $1,200.

"This also passed muster, and Wilson fled.

"The inquiry that naturally ensued developed the fact that he had taken with him a woman named Anna Golden, alias Alice Davis, whom he had met and conceived an attachment for at Dubuque. The pair were traced eastward, but lost after Chicago was reached.

"At this juncture the case came into the hands of the Chicago detectives.

"Horr's men watched closely, but found no trace for a couple of days, when one of them saw in a morning paper that a marriage license had been granted the day before to Fred Wilson and Anna Golden. Following this clue, the couple were traced to the National Hotel, 238 South Clark street.

"Here they were found on the register, 'C. F. Wilson and wife.'

"The clerk of the hotel furnished information that Wilson had left a package there, and was expected to return. Presumably he might be expected to come back for his package, and the hotel was closely watched.

"This 'piping' lasted until yesterday, and although traces were found of their man in various other places of the city, the detective at the hotel had a bootless watch until about 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon, when Wilson called for his package, and started on Adams street toward the Union Depot. He was followed by Detective Horr as far as the bridge, and there arrested. The officer took him to the Central Station, where he spent the rest of the afternoon in conference with A. C. Campbell, president of the bank that cashed the forged checks, who had been in Chicago most of the week.

"To Mr. Campbell, Wilson confessed the forgery, and added much to what was already known of his story. It appears that he went directly to New York with the Golden woman, and put in a fortnight with her 'doing up the town.'

"He bought the woman rings, dresses, and diamonds, paying exorbitant prices for poor stuff in every case.

"In this way he wasted some $300 of the money. Of the remainder $800 went at one fell swoop to a dealer in counterfeit money, into whose hands the unhappy young man fell.

"This sum was paid for $1,500 of 'the queer,' which was to have been shipped in a valise to Wilson's address in Chicago. This is what brought the young man here.

"Among his papers were found letters extending over a period of two years back, showing that he had had dealings during all of that time with counterfeiters.

"Wilson's infatuation for the woman is shown by the fact that on his return to Chicago he avowed his intention of marrying her. He had kept her during the past week in the notorious bagnio of Mollie Monroe, on State street, paying for the privilege at the rate of $6 a day. Officer Tierney arrested the woman, and secured from her much of the finery upon which Wilson had squandered his ill-gotten wealth.

"Both Wilson and the girl were much dejected.

"'Do you wish to remain with your lover?' asked an officer.

"She answered not a word, but looking up through a deluge of briny tears, she made a hop, skip and a jump across the detective's office, flopped hysterically upon the breast of her lover, gave one or two convulsive little sniffles, and planted one long, lingering, luscious kiss upon his trembling lips.

"'Good-by,' she said, and was led weeping away.

"Prison walls had come between their ardent hearts.

"She had previously delivered to the officer a watch and chain, ear-rings, and a pair of chain bracelets. The valise shipped from New York contained nothing but waste paper."

The life of Detective-Sergeant Thomas F. Adams is the next, and last of this series.

A DETECTIVE'S MISTAKE

A Serial Story

By GILBERT MACKEY

CHAPTER SIX

CONSTANTINE IS ACCUSED

HIS plan agreed upon, Sim Scudder retraced his steps with all possible speed.

Never in his entire career as a detective had he so thoroughly hated the business as he did at the present moment.

"Confound the whole business!" he muttered to himself, as he stood upon the steps of the Fenn mansion, waiting the servant's answer to his pull at the bell. "I'd give five hundred dollars, poor as I am, if I'd never been mixed up in this infernal business at all. My heart tells me that Al Constantine is innocent. My judgment whispers that he is a guilty man. Now that I'm in the case I must see it through to the end; and if justice ain't done that unhappy youth, why, my name's not Scudder. That's all I've got to say. Hello there, Bridget! Is Master Andrew up yet?"

"No, sor," replied the servant, who had now appeared. "He ain't come down."

"Go knock on his door, and give him this card, and say to him that I want to see him at once."

It was not yet seven o'clock, and it was hardly to be expected that the boys would be up yet, at so late an hour had they retired upon the previous night. In a moment the servant returned, with instructions that the owner of the card be shown upstairs at once.

"Come up, Sim!" shouted Andy, in his night-dress, his head thrust over the rail of the stairs.

Sim Scudder obeyed, and being ushered into the room by Andy, and heartily welcomed as well, the door was closed. Al Constantine lay in bed, looking pale and worn, but seemingly in a very quiet frame of mind.

"Good-morning, my boy," said Scudder, approaching the lad, and grasping his hand in a friendly way. "How do you feel? Better than you did last night?"

"A great deal, Sim. I acted like a fool; you fellows must have thought it very strange. How's Maurice?"

"Oh, he's all right; I left him in bed."

"Where he'll stay till noon," said Andy, with a laugh, at the same time pulling on his trousers. "The early worms have little to fear from him."

Instead of answering, the detective coughed uneasily, and seating himself in an easy-chair by the side of the bed, began to twirl his derby hat very nervously in his hands.

Somehow he could not bring himself to break the sad import of his errand—he did not know where or how to begin.

"Now, what in thunder ails you, I'd like to know?" demanded Andy, regarding him curiously. "Blow me if I understand what's come over our little gang; first it's Al that's nervous and full of mystery, and now it's you."

The detective's hat moved much more uneasily than before.

For the first time in his life he was utterly at a loss for words.

Suddenly his eyes, which had been wandering about the room, fell upon the broken banjo lying upon the bureau, where Andy had placed it the night before.

It was even as he had feared.

The bass string of Al Constantine's banjo was missing—it had been forcibly torn from the key, to which a small portion still adhered.

The eyes of both young men followed his movements.

"Well," asked Andy Fenn, somewhat strangely, "what's the matter now?"

Sim Scudder laid down the broken banjo without a word, and, crossing the room once more, seated himself upon the bed.

"Al, my friend," he said, in a quiet voice, "can you tell me now what happened to you during that short space of time you left us on the Nevada last night?"

The face of the youth before him turned pale.

"Excuse me, Sim," he said, in an agitated tone, "but I had much rather not speak of that affair at all."

"Can't you trust me?"

"I can; but this matter involves an affair so sacred that I would not speak of it to my dearest friend."

"That's me," put in Andy, giving his right suspender a spiteful pull. "I've tried my best to make him talk, but, confound the fellow, he won't say a word."

"Al," said the detective, looking him full in the face, "answer me one question, and then if you so desire I'll question you no more. Had you rather tell your story to me, or tell it to the police captain of the Fifth street station?"

"Sim Scudder, what on earth do you mean?"

"Simply this, Andy Fenn, that this house is now surrounded by officers ready to arrest Al for murder the instant he crosses the threshold of your door!"

"Murder! Al Constantine a murderer! Nonsense! rubbish! What in thunder do you mean?"

"He means, Andy, that I am accused of murdering Edson Gaylord in that hack upon the ferry-boat last night," said the boy, quietly, raising himself in the bed. "I felt that it must come to this the instant I saw his bleeding form last night. I felt it instinctively, and I fainted. God help me! I was right."

Tears forced themselves to Sim Scudder's eyes, despite of all he could do to prevent, while Andy Fenn stood pale and staring, the picture of horrified surprise.

"Sim Scudder," said Constantine quietly, flinging aside the bedclothes and seating himself upon the edge of the bed, "you are right, and more than that, you are kind. For giving me the opportunity of first telling my story to you I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Listen—it is very short—but first let me ask you, do you believe me guilty of murder or do you not?"

"If he does, by thunder, I'll kick him out of my house!" cried Andy, boiling with rage. "Who dares to accuse Al of murder, I'd like to know? Who——"

"Be quiet, Andy," replied the young man softly; "be quiet, best of friends. In coming here to arrest me, Sim has accepted the errand purely out of personal regard for me, I'm certain. Don't make his work any harder than it necessarily is."

"Al, you are right, and I thank you," answered Scudder. "My boy, I believe you innocent—as innocent as the sun, but I must admit that appearances are altogether against you—there's no denying that."

"I understand it, Sim, and I know you will help me all you can consistently with your duty. I am innocent of murder—I swear it by the eternal God. And yet the intention was in my heart for the moment, although I know no more than the dead by whom the actual deed was done. When I went out of that cabin to take the air I heard Edson Gaylord's voice calling my name. I looked around, and saw his head protruding out of the window of that fatal hack, and it is needless to say—for it was his normal condition—I also saw that he was very drunk. He wanted to talk with me, and much as I dislike the fellow, I unfortunately consented, and this is the result. Of that conversation I do not care to speak. Sufficient to say, he grossly insulted a young lady whom I love more than I love my life. More than that—he coolly told me that she had only yesterday promised to marry him, which I knew to be a lie.

"Maddened with rage, I leaped into the hack and fought that drunken brute as I would a tiger. I broke that banjo over his head.

"How much I injured him I cannot tell you; but suddenly realizing my folly, I gave him a parting blow across the forehead, and leaping from the hack, ran off toward the cabin door."

"And is that all?"

Again Sim Scudder looked him full in the face.

"All, Sim, as I hope to meet my God."

"Did you not draw a knife on him?"

"Never! I never carried a knife larger than this in my life."

He drew from his pocket a very small penknife as he spoke.

"It is most mysterious," said the detective, musingly. "And the bass string of your banjo? Did Gaylord tear it off?"

"I'm sure I can't tell. I was so enraged that I could not tell you what either of us said or did."

"But the bass string of your banjo is gone, Al. See, it has been forcibly torn from its key."

"And I can explain that," put in Andy Fenn.

He related the story of the midnight visitor of the night before.

"Upon my word, this is most mysterious!" exclaimed the detective, "and may throw an altogether different aspect upon the case. You are sure you were not dreaming, Andy?"

"Of course I am. Didn't I see the fellow as plainly as I see you now?"

All three looked at each other wonderingly.

Al Constantine was the first to speak.

"Well, Sim," he said, slowly, "since I am accused of murder, I suppose it becomes a question as to whether I dress and give myself up to you, or wait to be carried off less gently by some one else?"

"Al, that's about the size of it."

"Then," said the young man, springing to the floor, and raising his head proudly, "let me once more declare my innocence to you, my friends, and at the same time express my entire willingness, Sim Scudder, to go with you to the police-station in your official capacity as a representative of the law."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HOLLY TREE INN

TO such as have been called upon by adverse fortune to lead a Bohemian life in the great city of New York, to go hungry at times for want of the wherewithal to purchase a meal, to subsist at cheap feeding places, "hash foundries" we have heard them called, we have no need to say a word in decription of that meanest of all snares in the restaurant line, that supreme humbug of humbugs, the Holly Tree Inn.

For the benefit of those who may chance to read this tale, upon whom fortune has so smiled that they have never been reduced to the painful necessity of browsing upon the stubble of cheap restaurants of any sort, let me endeavor to explain what a "Holly Tree Inn" really is, before passing to the particular Holly Tree Inn with which we shall have to deal.

To put it briefly—and brevity, says some old sayer of wise sayings, is the soul of wit—a Holly Tree Inn is a cheap restaurant, started by well-meaning but misguided persons, usually women, for the purpose of supplying the city wanderers with food, free from the seductive influences of all beverages stronger than the weakest of all weak coffee and tea.

Such is the intention; but, alas! the intention is rarely carried out, and to the scoffer, to the ungrateful Bohemian, to the hungry wanderer, called by fate to patronize those places of scant food and long prayers, it often appears that the Holy Tree Inn, far from being conducted in pursuance of the ends for which it is devised, is "run," to use a vulgar and worldly phrase, in the direct interest of the pocket of the particular long-haired, psalm-singing, so-called Christian into whose hands its management falls.

In the Ann street beaneries one at least knows what to expect. In the three-by-nine holes in the wall along the docks, where choice chickory is sold for coffee, and suspender buttons found in the hash, no one can ever, even for one instant, claim to have been deceived, while in the "Jim Fisk" and "Boss Tweed" dining-rooms, in Chatham street, one can be sure of getting enough to eat, if he will but be content to take the food as it is.

All these are cheap and nasty, and every one knows it.

Therefore, no one entering their doors has a right to complain in the least, but with the Holly Tree Inn it is different. They, with unctuous Christian fervor upon their seductive hand-bills thrown broadcast about the streets, so many traps to catch the unwary, claim to be that which they are not.

In the "Boss Tweed" a greasy waiter, with dirty white apron, which looks as though it has not known soap for a year, will thrust his head close into your face, as you, with a weary, nauseated stomach scan the bill of fare, with a

"Say, boss, what's yours?"

At the Holly Tree Inn you are asked what you will take, with kind inquiries as to the state of your soul.

At the former you get a plate piled with more food, such as it is, than you can eat in a week.

At the latter you receive the smallest and thinnest possible slice of bread, a piece of beefsteak the size of a trade dollar, which would serve admirably as a hinge for your trunk, a cup of alleged coffee, which by no possible chance could ever have encountered even one of the brown Java beans, with a tract thrown in for the good of your soul.

Hypocrisy! canting hypocrisy! By no such mean device was ever yet the soul of man saved.

But enough of this. Let us turn to the particular Holly Tree Inn of which we are about to speak.

It is the evening of October 3, 1881.

Just one year from the night upon which our story opened, upon which occurred that little impromptu banjo concert by the five young fellows who have figured so prominently in the preceding chapters, as they passed through Peck Slip.

Many changes have taken place during this lapse of time.

Stated briefly, the following is in substance what they are:

Al Constantine, once tried for the murder of Edson Gaylord, lies, now awaiting a second tried, a prisoner in the Tombs.

Upon the first trial the jury disagreed; the second was now close at hand.

By the authorities it was deemed probable that the murder in the hack was committed while the boat was yet within the jurisdiction of New York.

Hence the unfortunate young man had been handed over to the authorities of that city, and for one whole year had been an inmate of that gloomiest of all gloomy prisons—the Tombs.

Detective Sim Scudder has had entire charge of the case.

In common with every one else, he now believes the boy guilty, although he has left no stone unturned to save him from the gallows and an ignominious death.

Maurice Barrytown has completely turned against his former friend; but that is owing to circumstances, and entirely after the manner of the world.

Maurice is a married man now, and his wife none other than Ella Gaylord, the sister of the victim of the unfortunate tragedy in the hack.

For the benefit of his sister Edson Gaylord had insured his life for $50,000.

This had been duly paid over by the company, and upon its interest Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Barrytown—for Maurice still has no occupation—manage to live.

I have said that all the world now believed in the guilt of Al Constantine.

I was wrong.

There is one exception.

Andy Fenn.

The faith of this youth in the innocence of his friend is unshaken.

He is as firm in his belief as upon the day of the arrest.

But a year has wrought sad changes for this light-hearted boy.

First, his father died of a malignant fever, leaving his family, who had always believed him rich, without a cent.

Two months later his mother had died of a broken heart—dropped dead instantly upon receipt of the news of the killing of her oldest son—Andy's only brother—in a terrible railway accident in the West.

Shortly after this the boy's sister, and only surviving relative, married, and with her husband sailed for Brazil: and to cap the climax, late in the summer the dyewood house failed miserably and Andy was thrown out of a place, without money, without friends, for all those of more prosperous days turned a cold shoulder now upon the afflicted boy.

Such is the position of the prime movers in our tale upon October 3, 1881.

All day long it had rained in torrents—it was the equinoctial storm, people said—and all day long in the pitiless storm Andy Fenn, still dressed in his last summer's suit, had been walking the streets of New York in the unsuccessful search for "a job."

Night was now beginning to fall, and the boy was thoroughly wet, tired, hungry and cold.

With less than a dollar in his pocket, with no home save the cheap lodging-houses in the Bowery, he was as wretchedly miserable as it was possible for a boy to be.

Since morning he had not tasted food, and then it had only been a cup of coffee and a bit of bread, in an exceedingly cheap restaurant downtown.

"Confound it all!" he muttered to himself, as he walked dejectedly along the Bowery, the rain dripping from his thin clothes and trickling down his face from his faded straw hat. "This sort of thing is not going to do at all. I must have work of some kind if I turn rag-picker, shovel coal, join the regular army, ship before the mast, it don't matter what, and to find work I must have strength—furthermore, strength is produceable only by food; it resolves itself into a question of something to eat."

The boy was right.

With but ten cents in the pocket, a man can invest that exceedingly limited capital in no better way than in the purchase of food.

A hungry man will never accomplish anything.

A well-fed man has always a chance.

What to eat and where to get it, was now, with Andy Fenn, the question before the house.

He had one dollar, and that was all.

He resolved to invest a quarter of that sum in food.

As his eyes wandered up and down the many signs which line the Bowery in search of a restaurant suited to his slender means, they rested upon a sign, just off that busy thoroughfare, around the corner of Delancy street, handing before a little old-fashioned shop, the door of which was reached by an ascent of several steps.

"HOLLY TREE INN."

So read the sign.

It was a cheap restaurant, established by Christian people to supply meals at reasonable rates to the toilers of the great city—a place of the peculiar type just described.

"Here's my place, now," muttered the boy, turning out of the Bowery and ascending the steps. "I ought to be able to get what I want here cheap, and plenty good enough, too."

He opened the door and entered.

The place, which was filled with little tables, covered with snow-white cloths, was scrupulously clean, and possessed about it a home-like air, which promised a comfortable meal.

Flowers blossomed in the window, a canary sang and chirruped in a cage, while around the wall hung various scriptural mottoes.

"Repent, hardened sinner, ere it is too late." "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging." "What shall I do to be saved," and the like.

By the side of the cashier's desk, at which sat a bright, pleasant-faced young girl engaged in sewing, hung a printed notice of a daily prayermeeting held within the place.

Andy removed his dripping hat, depositing it upon a nail, and seating himself wearily in a chair, mechanically took up the bill of fare.

It was brief and to the point.

Soup—of which there was but one kind—ten cents.

It could be purchased in any cheap restaurant for five.

Steaks, twenty cents.

That was not so bad if they were fit to eat.

But stay—what was this?

An extra charge for potatoes, another charge for bread!

Not a destaurant in the city, cheap or dear, but what furnished these articles free.

"What will you have, young man?"

The speaker was a man of something past middle life, whose rubicund nose seemed to betoken a personal knowledge of the truth of the second extract from scripture

mentioned above; viz., that alluding to wine the mocker, and the raging influence of alcoholic drinks.

Probably he was himself a converted sinner, placed in charge of this charitable institution in consideration of intimate personal knowledge of the habits of wandering sinners, and an extensive acquaintance with a wicked world.

"Give me a beefsteak and a cup of coffee," replied Andy, wearily.

Something about the home-like air of the place, the white cloths, the flowers, the chirping bird, the presence of the girl quietly sewing behind the cashier's desk, had touched the tender feelings of the unfortunate boy, and in spite of all he could do, tears would force themselves to his eyes.

He was lonely, cold, tired and wet.

He thought of the days, only a short while ago, when he was free to order a houseful of willing servants about, with a kind mother to see that her boy was fed on the best the market could afford.

But such are the vicissitudes of life in a great city.

Such changes occur every day.

Now we go up, up, up, and now we go down, down, down.

To-day we are at the top of the heap, to-morrow at the bottom—it makes no difference to the hurrying crowd.

Presently the red-nosed man appeared, with an infinitesimal piece of tough-looking steak, swimming in grease, and a cup of a dark watery liquid, which appeared like anything in the world save the coffee that it claimed to be.

He placed it before the tired boy with a sniffle and a familiar nod.

"Bread?" he asked inquiringly.

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Andy, doubtfully, his very soul revolting at the nauseous mess.

The bread was brought and duly added to the check, and the boy turned to make the best of his meal such as it was.

"Young man, is your soul saved?"

The words came from the lips of the red-faced individual in abrupt, business-like tones, as though the speaker were accustomed to propound the question with every meal he served.

Andy Fenn looked at him in astonishment.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, bolting a mouthful of steak, so tough that he might as well have attempted to masticate the heel of his boot.

"Is your soul saved? Have you found the peace of the converted sinner, or do you still wallow in the pleasure groves of Baal!"

"Upon my word," exclaimed Andy, laying down his fork, "I don't know what you mean by the 'pleasure groves of Baal,' but I do know that this is a wretched fraud of a steak. I'm afraid there's too much religion in this shop to suit me and too little to eat."

The red-nosed man looked at him in digust.

"My young friend, I fear that you are a scoffer," he said, with another sniffle, his face becoming as long as the arm of a fair-sized boy. "If you would seek the narrow paths of virtue instead of following the broad road of sin, you would learn to be satisfied with the meat that Providence gives you—the flesh-pots of Egypt would have no attraction for you. Read this tract upon the conversion of little Johnny Diggles, whose soul was saved at the age of eight. Read it—it will meet your case."

He thrust a printed tract in the face of the tired, hungry boy, who impatiently motioned it away.

"Let me alone, can't you?" he exclaimed. "I intend to pay for what I get—why can't you let me eat this miserable mess you have given me, in peace?"

"Let him alone, father. Can't you see that he's hungry and tired and wet through to the skin?"

It was the young girl who spoke.

She had laid aside her sewing, and had approached the table with her eyes fixed upon the wretched-looking boy before her with a pitying air.

"Jennie, mind your own business! Who runs this place, you or me?"

"You do; and the way you run it is a shame. Don't you see that he's half starved and wants something that he can eat? I can't stand this, and I won't. I'm going to give this customer a decent meal for once."

With flashing eyes, she pushed the red-nosed man aside, and seizing Andy's plate and cup, bounced out of the room with them both in her hand.

The man, muttering some incoherent words, followed her, to what was presumably the kitchen in the rear, from which the sound of angry voices could now be plainly heard, mingled with the clatter of dishes and the broiling of steak.

"Well, by gracious; this is the most singular shop I ever struck," muttered the young man to himself, with a laugh.

"That's the sort of girl I like; now, I wonder what her name is? I'd like to know her, blest if I wouldn't, if her father is the canting old hypocrite that he is."

He glanced about the room. As he did so his eyes fell upon a small gilt sign.

"JOHN DORRIS"

was the name it bore.

"Dorris!" exclaimed Andy, half aloud. "Now, I wonder if this can be the girl Al Constantine used to talk about long ago, in happier days?

"I wouldn't wonder a bit if it was," he continued; "Jennie Dorris, that was the name. I believe her father was just such a pious old fraud as this fellow, if I remember right. Poor Al! his second trial comes off to-morrow. How I wish I could do something to help him, but, fixed as I am now, my help can amount to nothing, try how hard I may."

How slight our knowledge of the future is!

(To be continued.)

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CURRENT NEWS

ORIGIN OF THE ALMANAC

The first written almanacs were probably compiled by the Greeks of Alexandria between 100 and 150 A. D. Calendars are much older, the ancient Romans having proclaimed the first of the month and posted a notice of its occurrence in a public place. The first of the month thus came to be called "the Kalends," from "I call" or "I proclaim," and thus the word calendar was derived. Probably the oldest calendar in existence was found in the ruins of Pompeii. It was cut upon a square block of marble, upon each side of which three months are registered.

A NOVEL RAT-TRAP

A rat-trap which electrocutes mice and rats as fast as they step on a baited plate, and rings a gong after each electrocution, has been invented by Oliver Smith, a chauffeur, residing at Springfield, Mass. Forty-four rats paid the death penalty a few night ago when the trap was given its first trial. The contrivance consists of a box with a small entrance on the level of the floor and a small sheet of copper in the middle of the death chamber with a spring underneath it. The bait is at the extreme end, and as soon as the rodent's weight is on the sheet the power is automatically turned on and the animal is shocked to death quite painlessly.

AIRPLANE LURED BEES

One of the largest apiaries in the State was robbed of half its million bees recently when an airplane from Park Field, Tenn., passed over the bee farm of Martin Polk, near Patterson, Mo., with a huge bouquet of magnolias. Scenting the rich fragrance of the flowers, the bees swarmed from their hives and began the pursuit of the sugar-scented airplane, which was on the way to the funeral of a former lieutenant of aviation. Fully half a million bees are estimated to have followed the airplane. When last seen, the bees, forming a large cloud against the sky, were pursuing the plane in a westward direction. They are known to have followed the plane at least twenty miles, and they have not returned to Poplar Bluff yet.

RARE MASTODON FOUND

The American Museum of Natural History announced that it had purchased the first mountable skeleton of a new species of mastodon of the Tertiary period. The newly found variety, which is yet to be named, is distinguished by a jaw much longer than that of any of the Tertiary mastodons known.

It is held that the find is another evidence that there once existed an Alaskan land bridge over which animals of a prehistoric age passed from Asia to North America. It is regarded as a descendant of a race of European mastodons, the skeleton of one of which is now on exhibition in the Museum of Natural History in Paris. In the Western Hemisphere, however, the long-jawed mastodon attained greater size than did the European variety. This animal stood eight feet high and its bones are very massive. The skeleton is practically complete. It was unearthed in northern Texas.

REINFORCING BRIDGE PILES WITH CONCRETE

A novel example of concrete work is to be found in the reconstruction of the pile foundation of a long wooden highway trestle at Port Angeles, Washington. The bridge is 2,000 feet long and crosses the bay at this point. On examination it was found that the piles had been badly eaten away by teredoes. As it was important to maintain the highway traffic without interruption, the piles were not renewed, but were reinforced by a concrete covering. Forms two feet square, inside measurement, were placed around the piles and filled with concrete. This was done during the eight-hour period of lowest tide and it was necessary to wedge the form down to keep them from being floated as the water rose. The forms were made in six-foot lengths, and if necessary were extended after the first length had been filled with concrete.

THE COPYRIGHT ACT

The first act providing for the copyright of books and other publications in the United States was passed 129 years ago. The term of copyright was then fixed at fourteen years, with the privilege of renewal for fourteen years longer. In 1831 the period was extended to twenty-eight years and providing for a renewal for fourteen years. For nearly a hundred years after the passing of the first copyright law the protection was extended only to citizens of the United States. In England a similar injustice was practised upon Americans, although the British government did permit foreigners to take out a copyright provided their work was first published in England and the author was at the time of publication anywhere within the British dominions. International copyright conventions now exist between nearly all nations. The first Copyright Act in England was passed in 1709, giving protection for fourteen years and for the author's life, if then living. In 1814 the English law was amended by extending the period to twenty-eight years.

FISH MOST PROLIFIC

The cod is estimated to yield 45,000,000 eggs each season. An eel was caught in Scotland which contained upward of 10,000,000 eggs. This, however, would appear to have been an exceptional find, and it is generally admitted that the cod is more prolific than any other fish. Though not equaling the cod, many kinds of fish are exceedingly prolific. More than 36,000 eggs have been counted in a herring, 38,000 in a smelt, 1,000,000 in a sole, 1,1200,000 in a roach, 3,000,000 in a sturgeon, 342,000 in a carp, 383,000 in a tench, 546,000 in a mackerel, 992,000 in a perch, and 1,257,000 in a flounder.

The oyster is also very prolific. It has been ascertained by recent observation that in the liquor of their shells small oysters can be seen by aid of the microscope—120 in the space of an inch, covered with shells, and swimming actively about. A herring weighing six or seven ounces is provided with about 30,000 eggs. It has been estimated that in three years a single pair of herrings would produce 154,000,000. Buffon calculated that if a pair of herrings could be left to breed and multiply undisturbed for a period of twenty years they would yield an amount of fish equal in bulk to the globe.

IN ONE DUCK'S STOMACH

"I was always impressed by the stomach of a black duck Doctor Eaton killed near Canandaigua Lake, New York, out of a flock returning from a flooded corn-field," writes Walter Pritchard Eaton in an article entitled "By Inland Waters," in *Harper's Magazine*. "From this duck's gullet and gizzard he took a few pebbles, snail shells, a little chaff and 23,704 weed seeds—13,240 pigweed seeds, 7,264 knot-grass, 576 dock, and 2,624 ragweed. As ragweed is popularly supposed to be the worst of all dangers to hay-fever sufferers, the hay-fever convention should certainly sit beneath a stuffed black duck. It is not, I fancy, generally realized that ducks consume so many seeds—in fact, it isn't generally realized, for that matter, how large a part all beneficent birds play in holding destructive exuberance of nature in check. The terrible and disgusting slaughter of our wild ducks, especially by wealthy hunters in the South in winter, is a blot on our national good sense."

MAKING COUNTERFEIT MONEY

The kind of money a counterfeiter makes depends mostly on what part of the country he lives in. In the East, where the paper circulation is greatest, bank-notes are most commonly counterfeited, with a little silver on the side. In the South and Middle West the natural demand is for silver dollars and half dollars. Out in the Far West the business is mainly gold, with very few bills of any sort.

It is always easiest for the counterfeiter in any one region to circulate the sort of money which is most abundant in that region. He gets rid of it more quickly, since there is a greater use for it. And it is safer. It is just like watching the market. Once in a while, of course, a particularly nervy gang or individual tried gold in the East or bills on the Pacific coast, but comparatively seldom.

It is puzzling to try to figure out how the proposition can possibly pay. The larger the coin or bill to be counterfeited, the greater the danger of detection, and hence the need of a more expensive plant. The commonest form of making spurious money is the turning out of base metal coins—even copper cents—but the operation is always an expensive one.

Silver, for instance, cannot be successfully cast. Base coins with silver in them must therefore be struck off with a steel die, a die representing days of work on the part of an expert engraver. Then there must be a powerful press to make the impression, to say nothing at all of the expense of running a chemical laboratory and keeping it secret.

There are two principal ways of making counterfeit coins, with endless variations of each. One is casting, the other stamping the cold metal. The latter always produces better results, as the coin is more accurate and more clearly cut. In the casting process a mold is generally made from a fresh and genuine coin. In stamping, a die is either cast or cut by hand. Both operations require hours of careful work and then the counterfeit metal is put in this die and struck with one sharp blow of a heavy press.

Expert counterfeiters do the work so well that the average person is easily fooled. In making silver coins they use a certain amount of silver and adjust the alloy of the other metal so that the finished product rings true, or very nearly so.

Gold coins, being worth more, are often more carefully worked over. One method is to cut about $4 worth of gold metal out of a genuine $10 gold piece, generally from the center, in one or two borings. The hole is filled in with a base alloy that is treated chemically so that it gives every appearance of the gold itself. Ring the coin or test the edge and it seems good. Detection in work like this is made a hundredfold harder than in counterfeits where none of the pure gold is used. This is the sort of work which the Secret Service agent with a pride in his job delights to follow up, and there are many instances in which he succeeds.

A PRODIGY IN MATHEMATICS

Illinois possesses a mathematical prodigy in William Strong, twenty-eight years old, of Tazewell County. He has been able to solve any problem in arithmetic that has been given to him. He reels off millions and billions with equal precision and promptness. One of his feats is to wander down to the railway station when a freight train dashes away and add up the numbers on the side of the cars. By the time the last car has passed he has the total.

People who are skeptical concerning his powers come long distances to test them. They are primed with brain-racking problems, but all prove easy for Stong. One of the most common queries relates to the number of seconds in a lifetime, given the date of birth. One who propounded this problem gave him the date January 26, 1873. Right off the reel came this reply: "15,783 days, 378,392 hours, 23,703,530 minutes, 1,362,211,200 seconds."

Another problem was: "It is 155 miles to Chicago. How many pounds of rails in the track at eighty pounds to the yard?" Without hesitation came the reply: "436,448,000."

Another one was: "An automobile wheel is thirty inches in diameter. How many revolutions will this wheel make in traveling the 155 miles to Chicago?" Stong came back with this answer: "104,476 revolutions."

A nail problem came next. He was told that thirty-two nails were to be driven. One cent would be paid for the first, 2 cents for the second and double the sum for each succeeding nail. He was asked how much he would be paid for the thirty-second nail. Almost instantly the answer came: $21,474,000.48.

One skeptic propounded: "With 25,000 miles around the earth and silver dollars at an inch and a quarter in diameter, how many will it take to girdle it?" Stong answered: "1,267,200,000."

He was asked to give the total of all the numbers from one up to 9,600, adding them together. His answer was 46,0084,800. The total of the numbers from one up to 78,000 was 3,042,939,000.

Stong was asked how many bricks would be required to lay a pavement from New York to San Francisco, 3,578 miles, the pavement to be sixty feet wide and the brick eight inches long and two inches wide. He figured that it would require just 10,201,377,600 bricks.

Asked to divide 68,719,476,736 by 32,768, he answered instantly: "2,097,152."

Stong says this peculiar talent has been with him since early youth. He was the despair of the teachers and the envy of the other children when he solved problems in a moment that required hours for the others. He says there is no particularly severe mental strain when working out the problems, that the answers stand out in front of him, so prompt is the response of his extraordinary brain to the demands that are put upon it. Stong never grows impatient when there are undue demands made upon him for answers to their problems. He treats all courteously and enjoys the look of amazement he evokes.

Stong has had many opportunities to travel with a circus and exhibit his extraordinary mental gift, but has declined all offers.

WHY THE SEA IS BLUE OR GREEN

The water of the Atlantic Ocean is green in shallow places, indigo in deep ones and black in the very deep ones; that of the Mediterranean is blue. The color of the water, however, depends upon the minute solid substances that are in suspension in it, and the purer the water the less color it has.

Prof. Tyndall explained this by pointing out that all color is due to light, and that the white light of the sun is composed of the colored rays of the spectrum, which pass through glass or water in quantities that vary with the wave length of the rays. Beyond the red rays lie the invisible heat rays, and beyond the violet lie the invisible chemical rays. When the light passes into the water the heat rays are absorbed close to the surface. The red rays pentrate further, but are soon extinguished. The orange rays follow the red, the yellow follow the orange, the green follow the yellow and the blue go on much further, until they too are absorbed.

There are two ways of regarding the color of the water—the first by looking at it when we get only the reflected light, the second by looking through it when we get the direct light.

If water contained no suspended matter and it was deep enough it would be black as ink, and though we might get a glint of white light reflected directly from its surface, we should get no light, hence no color, from its depths. This is often the case in mid-ocean, where it is very deep and the water is very pure. We never see it as black as ink, for even the purest water contains a certain amount of suspended matter, but we do see it as a deep indigo.

A white plate weighted with lead was sent overboard at the end of fifty or sixty yards of line and its color watched as it sank. It was always green and the color deepened as the plate sank to a great depth.

"If the plate," wrote Tyndall, "instead of being a large coherent mass, were ground to powder sufficiently fine, and in this connection diffused through the clear sea water, it would also send green to the eye."

Prof. Aitken made a similar test in the water of the Mediterranean and found that it was brilliantly blue in almost all places.

The blue or green hue is not caused by the reflection of light from suspended particles, however, but by absorption of the rays of light, beginning at the red end of the spectrum. This is proved by sinking various colored objects and watching their change in color. A lemon becomes green, for instance, and every color behaves as if seen through a blue glass.

The green color of the Atlantic and the blue of the Mediterranean are due to the different character of the minute particles held in suspension. And the color is always brighter near shore or over shoals because in such places it carries more particles than where it is very deep.

AUSTRALIA'S GOLD MOUNTAIN

A London newspaper announced the other day that the usual monthly dividend of $145,000 had been paid on the stock of the Mountain Morgan Mining Company. Thus far the lucky shareholders in this company have received more than $22,000,000 in dividends.

The richest gold deposits were found at the top of the mountain, and until the top had been quarried away the dividends amounted to more than $500,000 a month.

Mount Morgan, in the southeastern part of Queensland, Australia, is probably the most marvellous gold mine ever opened. There is pathetic as well as romantic interest in its history.

Years ago the mountain was owned by a poor border named Gordon, who eked out a precarious existence by keeping a few score of cattle. He had fenced in the mountain and a strip of the plain around it, established his residence there and fulfilled all the conditions necessary to make the property his homestead.

The few people who came to his little cottage wondered that he had chosen so uninviting a spot, for the pasturing was poor and little of the soil was adapted to cultivation. He said, however, that he had plenty of water, and that consideration had induced him to settle there.

One day two brothers named Morgan came to Gordon's cottage at nightfall and sought his hospitality. It was the custom in the bush country to make all travelers as comfortable as possible, and Gordon welcomed the strangers and set out his best store for their entertainment.

They were experienced prospectors and were looking for gold indications. As they were chiefly interested in mining, Gordon told them about his mountain. He said that he had observed curious green and blue stains all over it.

He excited the curiosity of the Morgan brothers, who next morning examined the mountain. A shower during the night had wetted the rocks, and one of the brothers observed indications of gold that fairly startled him.

They said nothing, but pocketed a few specimens of the rock and went on their way. They had discovered the richest known spot on the globe.

A few weeks later the Morgan brothers again appeared and offered to buy the land from Gordon at $5 an acre. He thought it was a good offer and decided to sell. At that time the Morgans had no idea of the enormous value of the mountain, though they were confident that it would pay handsomely to work it.

Gordon drove his cattle away to another freehold, and a few years ago it was reported that he had died in poverty. He lived long enough to know the value of the prize that had slipped through his hands.

A battery was needed to treat the rock, but the Morgans did not have money enough to buy the necessary plant. They therefore offered a half interest in the property to a resident of Rockhampton for $10,000, the money to be invested in machinery.

He said it was too great a risk for one man to take, but he found three other men to go in with him, each investing $2,500. There were thus six men in the enterprise, the Morgan brothers owning half of the property.

Five years later each of the six men was a millionaire. The stock is now more widely distributed, though it is in comparatively few hands. The mine has made a fortune for every one concerned in it.

It was found that the methods necessary for mining and reducing the ore were unique, as no similar formation or quality of ore had been discovered elsewhere. Original methods were therefore devised for working the mine.

At the foot of the mountain there is now a thriving mining town, and the whole district has been transformed by the great expeditures of the company. The place where poor Gordon's cattle found scanty subsistence is now marked by the luxurious cottages of an army of workmen usually numbering 1,200.

Geologists believe that they have discovered how this mountain of gold ore came to be formed. They say that the occurrence of the god is due to a former thermal spring that brought up the precious metal with other mineral substances, chiefly silica and iron, in solution and preciptated them at the surface.

In this way the wonderful mountain was built up and the whole of it is a solid mass of gold-bearing ore.

LEGENDS OF STRANGE WHITE RACES

There has for many centuries existed in the minds of many civilized peoples a curious fascination with reference to the idea that in remote parts of the tropics amid the dark-skinned races there flourish mysteriously isolated white tribes bearing a strong resemblance to the civilized branches of the Caucasian race.

The early adventurers in Central and South America brought home many tales of extraordinary cities beyond the mountains, and vague stories afloat in South Africa some forty-five years ago furnished Rider Haggard with a theme for one of his novels.

Legends like these are met in almost all the less explored regions of the world, and they have always certain features in common. The isolated white people almost invariably inhabit a mountainous region in a vague interior, always "just beyond"; they hold aloof from the surrounding races; they are seldom seen, and yet are definitely stated to be more civilized and better educated than the darker masses whom they avoid.

Less than fourteen years ago an American officer engaged in the operations against the Moros in the Philippines collected apparently substantial evidence relating to a mysterious white tribe in the Island of Mindanao. The mountainous district in the center of this island has never been explored and even the coast is not well known.

But along the seaboard many stories are told of the fierce white people who have their home in the forest-clad mountains of the interior. Eye witnesses depose to having seen a strange fair complexioned girl, who fled toward the hills as soon as she was addressed. Other men and women of a light-complexioned race are said to have been seen by more venturesome natives who were bold enough to approach the wild mountain district. The American officer was so impressed that he determined to conduct an exploring expedition across the center of the island. But apparently the mysterious white folk had vanished.

Arabia, however can with more reason boast of a white tribe. For years stories of such a race have been told concerning a mysterious race of light complexioned people who live somewhere in the mountains, shun strangers and speak a language all their own."

Various theories have been propounded to explain the fable, but probably the explanation is to be found in the narrative of a journey made to Oman in 1876 by Col. S. B. Miles, a British officer. Col. Miles in the course of his travels came across a town named Sheraizi, in the heart of the Green Mountains. This strange place was perched like an eagle's nest on the top of a great cliff, and was inhabited by people of lighter skin than the rest of the tribes in the interior. They rarely descended to the plains and refused to mix with or intermarry with the Arabs.

Col. Miles found they were descendants of a portion of the Persian army that invaded Oman in the fifth century. The isolation of the town and the curious behavior of its people gave rise to exaggerated stories in the bazaars on the distant coast, and in this case the origin of the fable may be regarded as fairly certain.

One may no longer believe in the existence of a strange white people in Africa. Rider Haggard's splendid race is probably only the Bahima, originally discovered by Speke in southwestern Uganda. At least Sir Harry Johnston claims to have discovered in them the clue to many of the mysterious white race legends found in the dark continent. He was engaged in nothing more thrilling than a tour of inspection of Anwole when he came across them. They are of a very light complexion and are the aristocrats of this region.

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